

Part 1

Prologue

The four masked figures walked on through the woods until they reached a clearing. They stopped and placed the stretcher they carried between them carefully on the soft grassy earth in the centre.

The clearing around them was beautiful in the morning sunlight, bathed in a golden glow; all around leaves slowly fell from their trees, landing softly on the forest floor.

The four figures all wearing plague-masks waited, standing at four points around the body and looming silently over it.

They waited.

The body was still. Not breathing.

Then all of a sudden, his eyes opened, and he took his first steady breath.

He sat up, resting with an elbow upon a knee. He looked at his hands, grinning widely. He spoke.

‘It worked? Are those my hands?’

He touched his face then, feeling only smooth skin, and no scarring.

‘I can see clearly now’ he said beginning to laugh. ‘I can see. I can feel.’

‘Did you ever doubt us for even a moment?’ one of the masked figures asked him leaning forward.

The masked figure spoke the man’s name.

The man glanced up at the figure, seeing the gloved hand of his offering him a mirror. He took it, staring back at his own reflection. He began to laugh out loud, touching his skin, his hair, his nose, his lips.

‘Handsome’ he beamed, showing himself perfect white teeth in his reflection. ‘I’m perfect.’

He handed the mirror back to the figure, rising to his feet.

‘I remember you’ he told the figures as he looked around at the four of them. ‘All of you’ he said turning on the spot. ‘But I don’t know who each of you are behind your masks.’

‘You don’t need to know’ another of the figures spoke, this voice was female.

‘What happened to me?’ the man furrowed his brow. ‘I...I remember my own name, and I remember *her*...’ he thought further. ‘I remember my body was scarred, I remember pain, but not where it came from. I remember my legs were burned, but I don’t remember why. I remember....I remember...’

‘Only what’s recent’ one of the masked figures finished.

‘I don’t remember anything of my childhood’ the man realised.

‘You suffered’ the masked figure said. ‘Horribly. Both mental and physical pain and for very a long time, most of your life in fact. We gave you a new body. Your memory reaches only as far as a few days ago when you first saw your new body; and nothing after or before that.’

Except for your memories of Lucy. They stretch as far back to the time you first laid eyes on her. You chose to have everything else erased.'

The man listened to these words closely.

'I remember when I first saw her....from the tower' the man realised. 'Yes. I remember. But...' he lifted his head to the others, 'why would I choose to erase my own memory?'

'You made the choice yourself' another masked figure reminded. 'You want it to be this way. So it's best we don't tell you.'

'Lucy' the man said. 'All I can think of is Lucy.'

'The love you have for her still burns strong' the other said to him.

'Yes' the man nodded. 'Yes I know.' He drew a steady breath. 'I know where she lives. I know she is waiting for me.'

'Before you go' one of the figures spoke up, stopping him in his tracks, 'there is one last thing we want you to do. For your own benefit...well...for someone else's....it's just best that you do it.'

'What?' the man asked.

'Three days from now, at midday...' the masked figure said, 'I think it's a good idea if you stand by the clock tower in the town where she lives in. Bring her with you and wait. Wear that coat' the figure indicated, and the man glanced down at the long coat he wore, bright blue it was and beautifully decorated. He would surely stand out anywhere wearing this. 'A man will come to see you' the masked figure continued, 'but he won't speak to you.'

'Do I know him?' the man asked.

'He is someone from your past' the masked figure replied vaguely. 'You knew him before your memory was erased, and he still knows you. He just wants to see that you are well, then you will never see him again.'

'Who is he?'

'It's best you didn't know.'

'But...he knows my memory was erased?' the man asked.

The masked figure dipped her head slightly. 'Yes.'

'Then why can't I know him?' the man asked, feeling suddenly a bit sad. 'He must have been someone important to me.'

The masked figures glanced at each other, one of them sighed.

'We shouldn't tell you' this one said. 'But the reason he wants to keep a distance from you is because he wants you to live a normal life. You didn't have a normal life before. You lived happily with Lucy for a short time, until things changed.'

'All he wants' another figure spoke, 'is to see that you are alive and safe and happy. That is why he chose for things to be this way. For you.'

'So' said another masked figure. 'Can you do that? Can you wait by the clock tower three days from now, wearing that coat, with Lucy by your side?'

The man stared at the blank faces of the masked figures silently as they waited for his response.

'Yes' he said at last. 'I will do that.'

Chapter One

The queen leant forwards on steeped fingers, listening to the advisor ramble on. He had been going for quite some time, but she waited until his mouth stayed closed for more than five seconds, before drawing breath to speak herself.

‘This is all terribly interesting’ she said without sounding terribly interested, ‘but why should we care about what the peasants do?’

‘They may be on the very bottom of society’ the lord reasoned, ‘but they are the ones who grow our food.’

‘They are at the very bottom for a reason’ Miranda retorted. ‘If they don’t like the way things are then they shall just have to suffer in silence, and anyway’ she spoke up quickly as the advisor opened his mouth to interrupt. ‘I thought you brought us here so we can talk about something important. Like the war. Not filthy peasants.’

‘Many people would find the way you talk about them disagreeable.’ The second advisor beside the first said.

There were many here now, all watching the queen with scrutiny and distain. They hated her; she could see it in their faces, though she couldn’t have cared less.

‘Many people think many things’ the queen spoke aloud. ‘And I do not care for any of them. This war’ she spoke suddenly louder, to emphasize the fact she was speaking and wished not to be interrupted, ‘has been going on for nearly five hundred years. I wish to see it finally come to an end. In my lifetime.’ She spoke quieter now. ‘Slaughter should not be a way of life.’

‘But my queen’ another advisor spoke up, a small and dull man, just as dull as the one that sat beside him. ‘Our soldiers are forced to invade other lands because of what the peasants have done in our own.’

The queen could not suppress a sigh now, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose, wishing it would all just go away.

‘The peasants’ she began, ‘protest high taxes to pay the war, by burning the food they grow to feed the soldiers, in doing so they cause more suffering than would otherwise be....starving themselves as well as the rest of the country...’

‘They are aware of this’ another advisor spoke out, leaning forwards on the marble table. ‘But many believe that their suffering will shine a brighter road for their future.’

‘They think we will give in’ the queen put simply. ‘They think we will reclaim our men, and bring them back home. In truth they are only giving more incentive for us to attack others for food.’ Miranda sighed again, scratching her forehead briefly before looking up. ‘If we cannot control even peasants...’

‘We cannot punish them’ one of them spoke up hastily. ‘There are too few of them as it is, and many are already willing to die. So what can we do?’

‘Maybe we should ask the king what *he* thinks’ the one beside him spoke.

Miranda glanced sideways to her husband. The king was sitting with his head down and hands covering his face as he leant on his elbows. It was as if he were in deep thought. But Miranda knew otherwise.

‘Carl’ she spoke firmly. ‘The council wish to hear your view.’

The king lifted his head reluctantly. ‘Anything my wife says’ he spoke in a mumble.

The council exchanged unsatisfied looks and began to murmur amongst themselves. Miranda leant forwards, speaking to the king in harsh whispered.

‘Sit up straight and look livelier. You look on deaths door as it is.’

‘I would like to express my concerns in...’

‘Another time perhaps’ Miranda spoke over the lord as she rose to her feet. ‘I’m afraid I feel unwell and a bit light headed. Please will you come with me my dear husband’ she said to him in a gentler tone. ‘If I should faint, I want you to carry me.’

‘When do we continue this meeting?’ one of the many surrounding the circular grey table spoke up as they made to leave.

‘The king will have something arranged in time’ she told them, moving with her husband out of the room. ‘You will be gathered again when that time comes.’ She snapped the door shut behind them before she could be interrogated further, sighing heavily and leaning against the door.

She straightened and to face her husband the king.

‘How do you feel?’ she asked him.

The king drew a deep and steady breath before answering.

‘Ghastly’ came his answer at last.

‘Well you look terrible’ she said walking past him, and then she paused. ‘Are you coming?’

The king moved towards her, walking slowly with his body hunched over and head hung. The queen held him by the arm as they walked, trying her best to support him, but he was larger than she was, and heavier, and she struggled as they went.

They managed to leave the building that was the council’s office without being bothered, or even seen by anyone, for which the queen was extremely grateful. They left the empty halls with their grey and black marble floors behind them, stepping through the ornate glass doors and descending the high steps which led to the courtyard below. Here waited a carriage to take them back to the palace.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and ambled towards the carriage. Miranda stumbled under the weight of her husband as she carried him. He was not a heavy man by any means, in fact he had lost weight, but Miranda was delicate of frame, and she struggled as they moved closer towards the carriage.

‘Leonardo!’ Miranda called to the driver. ‘Can’t you park this thing closer next time?’

‘I’m sorry your majesty’ the coachman bowed.

‘Don’t sorry’ Miranda snapped back, gesturing for him to stay in his seat as she opened the door herself, allowing the king to crawl in before her. ‘Just do it next time.’

She climbed into the carriage after her husband, slamming the door after her and sitting opposite him as the driver snapped the reins. The carriage jolted into motion as the horse began to trot, heading at a gentle pace back to the palace.

‘The council are beginning to notice’ Miranda said to him with folded arms. ‘If this carries on, it won’t be long before they start ripping at each other’s throats. If you don’t get better soon....’

‘I can’t make myself better’ the king gasped back.

Miranda fell into silence, watching him with a bored expression. She turned away, gazing out of the window, and watching the city pass them by.

‘We’ll be at the palace soon’ she said after a time. ‘Do you need to be carried?’

‘No’ the king whispered. ‘I think I can make it.’

They trundled onwards. Miranda saw the city around her as they went, with the cold grey stone that made up the buildings that looming over them, built tall and close together. It was suffocating. She felt eyes in every window, on every street corner.

She hated this city, hated everything about it; hated the common folk, but not as much as she hated her own home.

They stopped before the palace, the driver parking right outside the doors. The queen rose first, opening the door and holding it open for the king as he followed gingerly after her.

She closed the carriage door behind him with a snap, glancing about the palace at the faces that watched them. Above them a few faces of the soldiers that guarded the palace looked down upon her through the windows and balconies. Miranda looked up at them, as her husband entered the palace before her.

‘Take the carriage back to the stables’ she told the coachman shortly.

‘Yes your majesty’ Leonardo bowed.

She nodded to him, turning on her heel and striding towards the palace after her husband, slamming the large doors behind her. Across the hall she saw the king slouching away and through an archway, heading to his bedroom that had been moved downstairs some weeks ago, to save him the trouble of climbing the stairs. And in this palace there were many.

Miranda huffed deeply, making her way towards the nearest stairs and lifting the skirt of her dress as she began to stomp her way up.

The palace was a tall building, and if one wanted to get anywhere in it, most likely they would have to climb either up or down a set of stairs. From a distance, the palace looked as if it were made of glass, built with many towers, topped with sharp steeples that grew high into the sky like spears. A pale and in some places transparent building, that almost looked as if it had been built on the clouds, alongside the angels that sang there, a place where the seven gods themselves might live.

Many people would call this palace striking, ornate, eloquent and breathtaking.

Miranda would call it boring.

She thought to herself as she climbed in circles higher and higher up the palace stairs, how many levels the palace might have. She wondered to herself, and came to one clear conclusion.

Too many.

At long last and after becoming a little breathless, Miranda reached the correct floor.

Letting her gloved hand slip off the glass balustrade, she let her skirt go, stepping down the corridor and heading towards one of the closed doors in sight. A large door painted white with a grey spider pattern engraved upon it.

She reached the door and opened it without pause, standing in the doorway with her hand still on the handle.

Inside were two boys, twins, seven years in age. They both glanced up at her as the door to their bedroom opened.

‘Are you boys alright?’ she asked

‘Yes mother’ Cam looked up smiling, holding a large brightly coloured ball in his hands.

‘We’re soldiers!’ the other twin Luke called out happily, marching on the spot with a real soldier’s helmet that was far too big for him upon his head, and a wooden sword resting against his shoulder.

‘Is father back?’ Cam asked her, dropping the ball which rolled away and moving closer to her.

‘Yes. But I don’t want you seeing him. He needs his rest. Just stay here and...play or something...’ she closed the door after her, leaving swiftly without another word.

Miranda stepped lightly down the corridor, heading to her own room where her handmaiden was waiting for her.

She strode through the door briskly, marching up to her dresser and sitting in the seat heavily before it. Behind her, her handmaiden closed her bedroom door swiftly, before returning to her side in silence. Miranda’s stared at herself in the mirror, her long blonde hair was glossy and bright, wavy and beautiful. Looking this way made herself in general prettier.

She hated it.

Miranda lifted her hand to her wig, pulling it off. She always wore her wig in public. Her natural hair beneath was jet black like both her sons, and short. She had hacked it off herself, it was cut uneven lengths and looked scruffy.

Her handmaiden took the wig that was offered to her, returning it to its place on the mannequin which sat upon the dresses. As she did so, Miranda rose from her seat to stand, pushing her chair back. She removed her gloves slowly, one after the other, revealing lines of scars that ran up both her arms. Always when she was in public, like her natural hair, she would hide these too.

Miranda waited as her handmaiden pulled her dress down, and quickly and silently untied the corset she wore beneath. When it was off, Miranda was able to breathe freely. She waved the handmaiden away who scurried out of the room silently, returning to her own sleeping quarters that were just next door.

Miranda sat down again, and leant forward with her elbows on the dresser, sobbing into her hands.

Cam and Luke stared at the door their mother had just closed. The second the door had shut, Luke turned to Cam.

‘Let’s go see father.’

‘Yeah!’ Cam cried joyfully, dancing towards the door as his brother dropped his sword and threw down his helmet, skipping after him.

The young princes opened the door slowly, peering around to see if their mother was still in sight. But she was gone.

‘Come on’ Luke whispered.

They slipped through the door, running down the corridor and towards the stairs. Cam leapt up onto the balustrade, laughing as he slid down to the next level. The brothers ran and laughed as they chased each other, sliding down most of the stairs and bolting down the corridors.

Luke slipped off the balustrade on the lowest level, Cam bent down to help him up, taking his hand and running with him as they headed to their fathers room. They slowed as they reached the door, letting go of each other, each gasping deeply. They waited for a minute or so to catch their breath again before Luke reached forward, struggling to open the round door knob. He pushed the door open.

Inside the room was dark, all the windows had been covered by thick sheets.

Luke and Cam slipped quietly into the room, closing the door gently behind them. The two boys padded across the room and towards the bed in the centre. Luke crawled on top of the bed, while Cam stood beside it, leaning forwards.

‘Father’ Cam whispered. ‘Father?’

The king shifted in his sleep, waking slowly and smiling when he saw both his sons around him.

‘Boys’ he sighed. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Mother told us not to visit’ Luke told him as he sat behind him. ‘But we didn’t listen.’

‘We’re worried about you’ Cam added. ‘We had to come and see you.’

The king heaved himself up, propping himself back against the headboard.

‘We wanted to see if you’re alright’ Luke said, shuffling up beside him and leaning into him.

‘We missed you.’

‘My sons’ the king sighed happily.

‘We’re worried about you’ Cam repeated. ‘We wanted to see if you’re ok.’

‘Don’t worry boys’ their father smiled weakly at them, resting a hand on each of their heads.

‘Everything will be alright in the end. I’ll be fine. I promise.’

The funeral was the very next week. Cam stood beside his mother in the pouring rain, his brother standing on her other side. All three of them were dressed all in black, like the rest of the crowd that surrounded the procession.

As the coffin was taken away, Cam and Luke walked behind their mother, stepping carefully so as not to stand on the trail of her long black dress that dragged on the ground behind her.

Cam slowed to allow her mother to walk ahead, moving to her other side around the trail so he could get close to his brother. He walked beside Luke, hugging his arm as they went. The rain soaked through their clothes right to their skin, chilling their very bones. The boys shivered in the cold, clinging to each other for warmth.

When they had reached the garden the procession slowed to a stop. The boys watched with the rest of the crowd as the coffin was lowered into the ground. Cam fought back the tears, still holding his brother close, as Luke tugged on their mother’s sleeve.

‘Mother’ Luke said. ‘Why are they putting him in the ground? He said he would get better. He said he would be fine.’

‘Be quiet’ Miranda hissed down to him, shrugging him off her and tutting in annoyance.

‘He said he would be fine’ Luke repeated, beginning to cry now, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand as tears spilled down his cheeks. ‘He said he would be fine...’

Miranda watched her son closely, feeling a knot in her heart. She let out a sigh, kneeling beside him and holding him to her in silent comfort.

She raised her head to the heavy sky above them. The rolling black clouds rumbled, lightning flashing in the distance.

A storm was coming.

Chapter Two

It took hours for the hundreds of people to leave the palace garden, but Miranda had left at the earliest possible opportunity, taking her boys with her.

Some of the people who knew her tutted, the lords and advisers, and those who did not know her would say that she grieved, and could not stand the sight of her beloved husband being returned to the earth from whence he came.

But the truth was, she was cold, and fed up, and hungry.

And so she took her boys with her, back to their palace home with its many stairs and to one of the dining halls where food was being laid out for them.

Feeling ravenous Miranda tucked in, eating greedily whatever she fancied and drinking heavily the wine straight from the bottles.

Her sons did not share her appetite however. Cam just stared at the plates of steaming pastries and cakes and cold meats and fruits, realising he didn’t want any of it.

‘Mama’ Luke said after a time. ‘Can I go to my room?’

Miranda turned to him, leaning against the table and taking a swig from the bottle to wash down the pies. She stared down at her son.

‘Go’ she droned as she stuck more food in her mouth.

Cam watched Luke trudge out of the room, glancing back at his mother who wandered around the tables. She continued picking the food she wanted, piling it up on her plate before sitting down in a chair by the fire to eat.

He watched her as she ate in silence, after a time she leant forward, slipping a hand down the back of her dress and loosening her corset, before resting back again, taking her wig and her gloves off, before continuing to eat.

‘Mama’ Cam said to her. ‘Can I leave please?’

‘Go on them’ she replied in a monotone, speaking without looking at him as she picked up the bottle again.

Cam slid off his seat and left quickly without looking back, heading to his own room, thinking of his brother and wishing only to be with him.

Cam returned to their bedroom and found Luke sitting on his bed in the dark, curled up and hugging his knees.

He was crying.

Cam walked over to him slowly, crawling up on the bed and sitting beside him, holding his brother close as he wrapped his arms around him.

‘It’s ok’ he whispered to Luke. ‘No matter what happens we still have each other.’

‘We’ll look after each other won’t we?’ Luke sniffed miserably. ‘Always?’

‘Always’ Cam echoed without hesitation. ‘No matter what. Isn’t that after all...what brothers are for?’

They stayed together in the same bed that night, neither of them sleeping very well; they both woke early the next morning and sat side by side on the bed watching the sunrise from their window.

‘I haven’t seen the sun rise like that in ages’ Cam said, leaning on the window sill with his chin resting on his palms. ‘Do you remember when we were really young, and we used to wake up early to hide from our nanny?’

‘Oh she used to get so mad’ Luke grinned, forgetting his sorrows for just a moment.

‘It’s lucky we’re princes’ Cam said. ‘If we weren’t I’m sure she would have hit us a long time ago.’

‘We’d have probably deserved it’ Luke mumbled.

‘We haven’t left the palace in ages’ Cam spoke, suddenly realising as he said this. ‘We used to go all sorts of places. Do you remember?’

‘I do’ Luke replied forlorn. He leant back, hugging his knees. ‘We used to go to the beach most of all, and play in the rock pools, and jump in the sea...’

‘...and climb trees...’

‘...and make secret dens...’

‘...and climb the cliffs near the beaches...’

‘They were so steep’ Luke voiced. ‘It was so dangerous what we did.’ He sighed, rolling onto his side with his back to Cam, hugging his pillow tightly. ‘I miss it so much just thinking about it now. Why did we ever stop going?’

‘Father stopped us’ Cam said turning to him. ‘Don’t you remember?’

‘No’ Luke answered sadly back. ‘I must have forgotten.’

‘He said it wasn’t safe out there, and that we have to stay close to home.’

‘I feel like I want something else’ Luke spoke softly. ‘This place feels different now without father.’ He fell silent for a moment. ‘I’ve just thought...we’ve never really been to the city outside.’ He sat up again, his attention drifted back to the window and to the streets and houses beyond. ‘Why?’ he asked. ‘It’s so near, and we hardly even know it.’

‘I don’t like the city’ Cam admitted. ‘It’s nice watching from far away, but it’s just too strange and busy. So many people I don’t know...I wouldn’t want to be out there.’

‘That’s probably why I haven’t been either’ Luke said to his knees. He sighed heavily again.

‘I miss father. I can’t believe this has happened.....he said he’d be ok.’

‘He was probably trying to be strong for us’ Cam said turning to him.

‘I know but....’

‘Don’t cry’ Cam said, leaning forward and hugging his brother. ‘Father wouldn’t have wanted you to be sad.’

‘I know’ Luke whimpered, rubbing the tears from his eyes before they could fall. ‘It’s just so hard and so unfair. Why? Why did it have to happen?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe the gods wanted it so; maybe they had other plans for him.’

‘I guess you could be right’ Luke answered miserably.

‘Hey’ Cam said, forcing a cheery tone. ‘I know what we should do, let’s leave the palace.’

‘Leave the palace?’ Luke stiffened slightly. But...we shouldn’t. ‘It isn’t right.’

‘Why not?’

‘Father wouldn’t have wanted....’

‘Father isn’t here anymore’ Cam told him, grasping either side of his face. He smiled for Luke. ‘Let’s go to the beach together’ he said, ‘like we used to.’

‘That sounds...fun’ Luke finished as the idea swam around his mind.

‘Let’s go now’ Cam encouraged, ‘before anyone can stop us.’

‘You mean it?’ Luke asked, becoming excited at the thought.

‘Yeah’ Cam beamed, leaping from the bed and heading towards the door, pulling his brother with him as he went. ‘Come on!’

Cam opened their bedroom door a crack, peering out and grasping his brother’s hand tightly. He first looked one way, and then the other.

‘It’s all clear’ Cam whispered, stepping through the door and tugging his brother playfully after him. ‘Come on Luke.’

They made their way quietly down the silent and empty corridors, pausing after a time only when they came across a guard stationed at one of the posts. There were always guards to be found throughout the palace, usually singularly, but in certain places like outside the council chambers and near the entrances of the palace, there were more. Mother had always told them they were there for their protection, each within calling distance of many others. If the boys were ever in any danger, they need only shout.

The guard they came to now regarded them with a glance of disinterest, only his eyes visible through all his armour. Even his hands were covered by heavy gauntlets, and the spear at his side was sharp. He looked menacing in his height and gold armour, standing by the window and glistening in the sun, like the still ocean on a clear summer’s day. Cam hesitated as Luke made to run past, pulling him back before the soldier who watched them with a bored expression.

‘Hey!’ Cam smiled up at the stranger. ‘You’re big, you know that?’

The guard stared down at him in silence, not responding.

‘Hey Luke’ Cam gleamed at him, ‘help me up.’

Luke crouched low so that his brother could climb onto his shoulders, rising unsteadily and wobbling as Cam began to straighten, grabbing onto the armour of the soldier before him for support.

The guard didn’t move as Cam, helped by Luke crawled onto the guards shoulders and sat on his helmet. ‘It’s so high up’ he sang happily. And then he noticed the feathers sticking out of the soldier’s helmet, a beautiful turquoise plume from some exotic bird that lived far away.

‘Hey look’ Cam chattered, plucking one out after the other. ‘We can have one each.’

He slid off the guards shoulders, tumbling awkwardly back down to the ground as Luke tried to catch him.

‘Steady’ Luke told him. ‘I don’t want to drop you.’

‘Here’ Cam said handing his brother one of the feathers. ‘For you.’

‘Thank you brother’ Luke smiled taking it.

‘And thank you’ Cam said back to the guard. ‘You’ve given us a great gift.’

The guard didn’t answer, but simply stood there mutely.

‘Come on’ Cam said to Luke shoving his own feather into his back pocket. ‘Let’s go.’

Luke followed after him, pocketing his own feather and setting off after his brother.

Behind them, the guard they had left behind gave a heavy sigh, his helmet now missing its feathers looked out of place. His eyes quickly glazed over as he returned to his daydreams.

Nine thousand and seventy two.....nine thousand and seventy three.....I wonder what the wife’s doing.....probably still in bed....lucky thing.....not that itch on my foot again.....god its hell.....I wish I could scratch it.....

The boys made it to the front entrance of the palace, only to find it locked.

‘Why is it locked?’ Cam spoke aloud, tugging hopelessly on the great metal handles. ‘It’s never locked.’

‘Don’t they normally lock the doors after a funeral?’ Luke offered. ‘You know....if someone important....’ He trailed off.

‘Yeah I think you’re right’ Cam said letting go and turning to his brother as another thought struck him. ‘The catacombs have that tunnel where....uh oh...’

The two boys suddenly straightened as they saw their mother approaching them, behind her walked another woman who was tall and skinny, with aged skin and grey hair pulled tightly back.

‘Oh no’ Luke whispered to Cam at the sight of her, ‘not the governess.’

Miranda stopped before her sons.

‘You should stay here for a while’ she told the boys. ‘The doors will be locked for a few days.’

They didn’t answer.

Their mother glanced to the elderly woman behind her. ‘Sylvia tells me you need to be kept busy today, and I’m thinking she’s probably right. I know you were both very close to your father, and I’m sure this is all very difficult for you, and I want you to know that....’ she sighed heavily then, rubbing her forehead wearily, not even bothered to finish her sentence.

‘Just behave yourselves’ she finished before striding off to do her own thing.

The boys watched her uncertainly, before they turned their attention simultaneously on the governess as she stepped forwards.

‘I have some lessons for you today’ the elderly lady said. It was the boys most dreaded sentence they were so used to hearing. ‘To keep your minds busy, I thought we might look at the histories of the capitals again. We haven’t yet spoken about the capital Bealcrest, and I thought that after that we could...’

‘RUUUUNNN!’ Cam cried unexpectedly bolting in one direction before she had finished her sentence as Luke bolted in the other direction, instantly obeying him without a moment’s thought.

Sylvia stood there with her mouth still open in mid-sentence, facing only the air now. She heard two doors slam behind her, one after the other, the sound coming from opposite directions.

She sighed wearily, turning and walking away. She went back to her room hidden deep within the tall palace, sitting by the glowing fire in a comfy chair with a book upon her lap.

‘Poor boys’ she spoke tiredly to herself, before opening the pages of her book and beginning to read. ‘It’s not fair that you should have to suffer like this.’

Cam and Luke reunited in the catacombs a short time later, breathing heavily from their excursion and grinning at the sight of each other.

‘That was a close one’ Luke sighed heavily.

‘Yeah’ Cam beamed back at him, ‘we almost got roped into a whole day of boring studying.’

‘Why do we need to know all that stuff anyway?’

‘I suppose it’s important to know when we grow up’ Cam said. ‘It’s not all good being a prince you know?’

‘I suppose, we’ve still got a lot to be thankful for.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well....how many other people get to live in a palace?’

‘Good point’ Cam smirked back. ‘And no one is allowed to tell us off.’

‘Except for mother.’

‘Yeah but we hardly see her.’

‘And that’s a good thing.’

‘Yeah’ Cam nodded. ‘Now come on’ he said. ‘I hate these dark caves. They scare me so much.’

‘Is that why you’ve never gone down into the prisons?’ Luke asked him, ‘because you’re scared?’

‘Don’t tell me you’re not scared of that place too’ Cam said angrily. ‘Just the thought of that place...you know the stories father used to tell us...’

‘Yeah’ Luke admitted. ‘They were like horror stories.’

‘I don’t ever want to go down there’ Cam told him, ‘I heard screams once...’ he trailed off, falling silent.

‘Hey Cam’ Luke said after a time, as they made their way forwards through the dark. ‘Why wasn’t father buried here?’

Cam pulled back hesitating.

‘I don’t know’ he said. ‘Maybe he hated this place, like I do.’

‘I don’t like it either’ Luke admitted. ‘I’d hate to be buried underground in a place like this....in the dark....I’d like to be buried next to father when I die.....in the sunlight....’

Cam took his arm gently as they went. ‘Come on’ he spoke softly. ‘Let’s go.’

They walked carefully through the dark, following a tiny stream that ran through the catacombs underground. Their only light came from a single tiny window built high up in the room, through which shone the sun’s golden rays.

The stream the boys followed grew wider the further they walked, and by the time they reached the wall from which the stream ran beneath, it was deep enough to swim through.

‘Do you want to go first?’ Cam asked.

‘I always hate this part’ Luke muttered under his breath. ‘The water’s always so cold.’

‘I know, but it’s only for a moment.’

Luke braced himself, slipping into the water and gritting his teeth against the chill, instantly beginning to shiver violently.

He took a deep breath and slipped beneath the surface, disappearing from sight. Cam waited for a moment, before following after him through the water. He drew a deep breath, and plunged into the river, swimming upstream and following the river bed. He was a strong swimmer, but the current was gentle. The outside world was right before them, just on the other side of the wall within their reach.

On the other side Luke broke through the water, gasping and feeling the fresh air on his face. He climbed out of the rocky pool, turning and helping Cam out of the water as he surfaced behind him. Cam ran his fingers through his black hair, sweeping his fringe back and out of his face. He began to shiver too.

‘It’s ok’ Cam said to Luke. ‘The sky is clear, it’s going to be a good day today; we’ll dry in no time.’

‘I hope so’ Luke replied, taking his shirt off and squeezing the water from it before putting it back on again. ‘I hate feeling cold and wet. It’s so unpleasant.’

‘It’s been so long since we’ve been out here’ Cam said happily, throwing his arms out and holding them there, as if waiting for the sun to dry his sleeves. ‘Where should we go?’

‘It’s been so long since we’ve been out here’ Luke said, ‘it doesn’t matter where we go.’

‘You’re right’ Cam said lowering his arms again. ‘Let’s go there’ he said pointing in a random direction and setting off. ‘Come on!’

‘Hey wait for me!’ Luke called after him, balancing precariously on the uneven rocks as he meandered his way after his brother.

Luke jumped from the rocks and onto the soft sands, running after Cam across the open beach. They ran through the waves, splashing and wrestling with each other in the water, before setting off again for the rock pools on the other side of the beach. The sand was warm at their feet, and the air felt fresh.

‘I’ve always loved it here’ Luke said as they slowed to a stop, panting heavily. ‘I don’t know why we ever stopped coming.’ He turned in a full circle as he walked, taking in the open and deserted world around them. ‘There’s never anyone else here’ he sighed content. ‘Why is that?’

‘I don’t know’ Cam replied. ‘But that makes the beach all ours.’ He smirked. ‘And I like it that way.’

‘Hey why don’t we see if we can find that den we made in that cave?’ Luke said turning to Cam. ‘Do you think it’s still there?’

‘Probably not’ Cam shook his head. ‘The sea would have washed the sand walls away a long ago.’

‘Awww’ Luke groaned. ‘That took us ages to shift.’

‘The cave will still be there though.’

‘Do you think we could find it again?’ Luke asked dubiously. ‘It was a bit of a long way out, and hard to find....and all the rocks look the same.’

‘We’ve got time’ Cam waved nonchalantly. ‘We’ve got all day, and if we don’t find it today, we can always come back and look for it tomorrow.’

‘If mother hasn’t stopped us going’ Luke grumbled.

‘How is she going to stop us?’

‘She might block the catacombs’ Luke said to him.

‘Then we will climb through the window’ Cam nudged him.

‘That sounds dangerous.’

‘Come on’ Cam said shoving him playfully now. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Wait!’ Luke called after him. ‘Wait for me!’

Cam didn’t slow, instead he ran faster, moving dangerously quick across the jagged rocks with extraordinary agility, and laughing as his brother struggled to keep up behind him.

‘I said slow down!’ Luke gasped, coming to a stop and panting minutes later, leaning against one of the rocks for support.

‘Slow down?’ Cam echoed returning to his side. ‘Maybe you should *speed up*.’

Luke smiled weakly at him. ‘You know I’m not as fast as you’ he sighed, straightening up.

‘Hey’ Cam smiled patting his shoulder. ‘I think I found the entrance to that cave. Look’ he pointed. ‘It’s right over there.’

Luke leant forward, hand shielding his eyes as he squinted across the field of rocks, struggling to see.

‘It all looks the same’ Luke said.

‘It’ll become clearer when we get a little closer’ Cam nodded. ‘It’s defiantly there, though I doubt anyone else could find it. It is such a secret place after all.’

They made their way onwards, together meandering slowly over the rocks and to an unremarkable spot, one easily overlooked amongst the field of jagged pinnacles enveloped with dried seaweed and limpets.

‘I can’t believe you found it’ Luke was saying, bending down to gaze down the hole with a hand upon the roof of the cave.

‘I had a general idea where it was’ Cam told him smugly. ‘After you?’

Luke glanced at him, giving him a smirk before making his way forwards, crouching low beneath the low ceiling. They were able to stand tall again once they had reached further inside the tunnel.

‘Careful’ Cam hissed, grabbing Luke’s arm as he stumbled.

‘It’s this dam seaweed’ Luke huffed, rubbing his palm he had stuck out to break his fall. He had grazed it slightly. ‘I wish we had a burning torch’ he was saying. ‘Then we’d be able to see.’

‘We’d never be allowed to carry such a thing’ Cam told him. ‘And anyway, how could we get it out here? It would get soaked by the river then we could never use it. Now come on’ he encouraged. ‘Let’s keep going.’

They moved further down the tunnel until they found their den. Small holes in the rock in the ceiling above them let in tiny spots of light, keeping the cave from being in total darkness.

‘Do you remember this thing?’ Cam said to his brother, lifting a stick that rested at the back of the cave and holding it like a staff.

It was a thing that had once loved, back in the days they used to come to this den regularly. Having stolen a small knife from the kitchens, they had made little carvings into it, and after that tied seashells all around it so that when it shook, the seashells rattled. Like an instrument. 'I can't believe it's still here' Luke said taking it from Cam and running his fingers over the wood. 'It feels so strange to hold it again. Hey' he glanced up at Cam, instantly forgetting the stick. 'Do you want to see if we can find that other tunnel again?'

'You go first' Cam offered, as Luke propped the stick against the cave wall, leading the way. It was precarious. Water dripped on their heads from the roof of the cave, and the walls were slimly with algae.

'Careful you don't slip' Cam hissed to Luke as he shuffled forwards. 'And don't touch the water. You don't know what's in there.'

Luke paused, turning back to him. 'Don't try to scare me.'

'It's only the truth' Cam waved at him defensively. 'Do you remember that time we were swimming in one of the rock pools and that eel went up your leg?'

'Now don't tease me!' Luke scowled. 'I thought you had forgotten about that anyway.'

'Oh Luke' Cam grinned, reaching forwards and patting his brother's head heavily. 'I'll never forget the way you squeaked.'

'Shut up' Luke cried indignantly, slapping Cam's hand away. 'Just don't tell anyone ok!'

'I promise' Cam said showing his hands. 'Cross my heart.'

Luke turned away from him sulkily, continuing to crawl forwards, with Cam shuffling after him, biting his lip and trying his hardest not to laugh.

Further at the back of the cave they found it, a narrow tunnel that led back to the surface, to a grassy place on the cliffs that overlooked the beach. They were still small enough to fit through the gap, and so made their way onwards. When they reached the opening at last, Luke hauled himself out of the tunnel, turning back to help Cam. They straightened, breathing the fresh air again and feeling the sunlight in its full upon their faces.

They made their way around the large rocks just jutting out of the ground around them, heading into the open where great plains rolled on and on for miles, where wild horses ran and magicians lived and travelled the roads in secret. Or so they liked to believe. It had always been a dream of theirs to one day find one, and though it wasn't a mage they found that day, it was just as exciting a find for them.

Rounding one of the rocks and stepping out into the open, Cam suddenly drew back sharply, pulling his brother with him back behind the rock.

'Cam...what?'

'Shhh' he hissed at him, putting a finger to his lips.

The two leant around the rock again, peering at two figures that stood before them.

The two figures were both identical, except for height. Both were clad all in black, hooded, with even their hands covered by black gloves.

Cam furrowed his brow, daring to lean forward to get a better look. The two figures stood very close, the taller leant forwards towards the other, who remained still. They appeared to share a kiss. The taller figure that had moved leant back, then tensed suddenly, noticing Cam and Luke leaning out from behind the rock.

Cam gasped, hiding behind the rock again beside his brother.

'Who's there?' came a male voice.

‘What is it?’ added a female voice, the shorter of the two figures. ‘Did you see something?’ Cam leant around the rock again, daring to look. He saw both hooded figures lifting masks to cover their faces, before raising their heads again. The masks they wore were both identical. Black with a long beak like a crow’s, and large eyes like glass windows, behind which nothing could be seen, only what was reflected from the world.

‘A boy?’ the female figure said. ‘Two boys’ she added, as Luke peered around too, ‘two cute boys. It’s ok’ she spoke kindly leaning forward with her hands on her knees, coming to their level. ‘You can come out, we won’t hurt you.’

Cam and Luke stepped tentatively out from behind the rock.

‘Aren’t they adorable?’ the female figure spoke back to the male figure behind her, turning to him briefly before looking back. ‘And you’re twins! That’s even more adorable! Come closer children. It’s safe, I promise.’

Cam and Luke moved slowly towards the figures, sticking close together as they did.

‘Aren’t you the sweetest things?’ the female figure said to them, falling on a knee so that they could see eye to eye.

Cam could hear the smile in her voice.

‘And what are your names?’ she asked them.

‘I’m Cam.’

‘Luke.’

‘Ooohhh’ the female figure squealed in delight. ‘I just want to dip you both in chocolate and eat you!’

‘Please don’t eat us’ Luke mumbled.

‘Who are you?’ Cam asked her.

‘Who me? You can call me....Auntie.’

The male figure behind her tutted, his body language seemed to disapprove, he seemed to be annoyed.

‘We should get back’ he told her shortly.

‘You go on ahead’ she waved dismissively at him without looking. ‘I’ll catch you up later.’

The male figure turned and stormed off immediately without pause, disappearing behind one of the rocks and out of sight, they did not see him again.

‘And where do you boys come from?’ the female figure asked them both eagerly.

‘From the palace’ Luke mumbled.

‘Do you live there?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re princes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Two little princes’ the female figure gleamed behind her mask. ‘How delightful. And what are you doing all the way out here on your own?’

‘Playing’ Cam said.

‘Exploring’ Luke added.

‘Ooohhhh, that sounds so exciting! But where is your mother, does she know you’re out here alone?’

‘Our mother doesn’t care much for us’ Cam grumbled. ‘We only see her sometimes.’

‘So who looks after you?’ the figure asked.

‘The governess’ Cam said.

‘When we were younger it was the nursemaid’ Luke added. ‘But most of the time we just look after ourselves.’

‘What about your father?’ she asked them.

‘He...died....’ Cam mumbled at his feet, ‘recently....’ He sniffed.

‘Oh you poor babies’ the figure cooed. She reached forward to embrace them both, but far from being alarmed by this, it felt comforting, and each of the boys held her back instinctively.

‘I’ll look after you both’ the figure said to them, holding them close. ‘I’ll be here for you.’

Chapter Three

The boys returned home hours later, creeping along the silent corridors, moving swiftly and quietly so as not to be noticed.

They had hoped things would remain this way, and that their absence would be overlooked. But when they returned to their room, they found their mother was waiting for them.

‘That wasn’t a very smart thing you did’ she said rising from the bed she had been lying on. It appeared as if she had fallen asleep there, having perhaps waited a long time.

She rubbed her eyes as she straightened up.

‘Where did you go?’

The boys didn’t answer, only hung their heads, diverting their attention away and clinging close to one another.

‘I think the both of you need to learn a lesson in proper behaviour’ their mother continued.

‘Your lessons with the governess have been extended. You will spend the rest of the day with her studying; then you will go to bed. Is that clear?’

‘For how long?’ Cam dared to ask.

‘Until I say otherwise’ their mother answered shortly.

A short time later, and the boys were sitting side by side at the table in the study, their governess Sylvia sitting before them. The boys would often sit through lectures; these were held several times a week. In these lectures they would learn how read and write, they would learn new and complex words every day, and learn the history of the kingdom, their fathers kingdom, and the names of all the important lords and ladies, and who knew who blah, they would learn of science and alchemy blah, and how numbers worked together blah, they would learn about breeding and nature blah blah, and why certain insects chose certain flowers to visit blah blah blah and how their habits blah helped spread the growth of flowers blah and blah and crops which were blah by the peasants and how the food produced blah blah blah was distributed throughout the blah, to all corners of the blah, from the lords to the blah, right up the chain until it reached the plates of the royal king and blah, and that is how the bread that blah and blah they would receive got to their table this morning. Not that either of them ate it. They were too busy trying to escape lectures like these. Unfortunately, it had caught up with them.

‘Uuuuuhhhggg!’ Luke fell forwards on the table, his face hitting the open book before him.

‘Luke, please sit up’ Sylvia said patiently.

‘But this is so boring!’ Luke declared loudly, his voice muffled by the pages of the book, his nose squashed against the paper as he sat there, arms limply hanging by his side.

‘Oh come on Luke’ Cam said beside him, shaking him by the shoulder. ‘It’s not so bad.’

‘This *is* bad’ Luke said dramatically, rolling his head over to face his brother, but not lifting his head off the pages. ‘This is terrible...’

For the briefest of moments the boys had been happy, but now trapped within their palace home, they felt only sorrow.

‘I like it better outside’ Luke mumbled, pressing his hands upon the table and sitting up with a groan.

‘What boy?’ Sylvia asked him. ‘Speak up.’

‘I said’ Luke spoke harshly, ‘I like it better outside.’

‘It’s not safe outside these walls’ the governess replied softly to him, ‘especially not now that your father is gone.’

‘Where is he gone?’ Luke asked her sullenly.

‘To another place’ Sylvia answered.

‘That doesn’t answer my question’ Luke glowered at the books on the table before them.

Sylvia had been attempting to teach them about the Great War, sparked by religious conflict a long time ago, a war which had lasted a hundred years, a war in which many people had perished in the thousands.

‘Why don’t you know where people go when they die?’ Luke asked the governess.

Cam glanced up from his book as Luke spoke.

Sylvia let out a deep sigh, leaning forward on the table with her lips pursed. ‘I’m afraid’ she said, ‘nobody knows where you go.’

‘But why?’ Luke demanded with voice raised. ‘So many people have died already’ he said staring down at the picture in the book before him, a picture of a mounted soldier decapitating a man fleeing on foot. Many other bodies had fallen around the feet of the mighty stallion.

‘So many people have died in the Great War’ Luke spoke in a distant voice, ‘but no one knows where they go when they die.....why is that?’

‘I’m sorry for what happened to your father’ Sylvia spoke softly. ‘It was a terrible tragedy.’

‘It’s not fair’ Luke whined. ‘It’s just not fair...’ he bowed his head, blinking back tears. Beside him his brother watched silently.

‘I want to see him’ Luke spoke up after a few seconds. ‘I want to see where he is buried.’

‘I don’t know if that is such a good...’

‘I want to see him’ Luke repeated loudly, lifting his head with tears in his eyes. ‘I want to see my father.’

Sylvia gazed at the boy sadly, feeling sorrow in her heart.

‘Alright’ she submitted. ‘I will take you to him.’

They left the study behind them, walking down several flights of stairs; they exited the palace through a door that opened out onto a small balcony. From this balcony was another set of narrow stairs that led to the garden below them.

Sylvia walked through the gardens at the back of the palace, holding each of the boys hand in hers as they made their way forwards. The sky above their heads was beginning to darken now as the sun dipped towards the horizon, the garden around them was eerily still. Nothing within it moved, not a single branch of the trees or a blade of grass, there was not a soul here at this time, save for the three.

They came to the tomb, a great slab of grey stone that sat upon the earth. Here is where the king lay to rest. Here is where their father would sleep forever.

Sylvia let go of the boys and they moved close to the tomb, descending upon it. Luke let out a sob, resting his arms against the side of the tomb as he leant into it. Cam came up beside him, holding his brother by his shoulders in a tight embrace. But neither could he keep the tears from their eyes.

‘It’s not fair’ Luke sobbed. ‘It’s just not fair...’

‘Why was he buried out here’ Cam asked Sylvia, ‘why not in the catacombs with the other kings and queens, with our grandfathers and grandmothers?’

‘Your mother ordered for him to be buried here’ Sylvia told them. ‘He is here because she made it so. She did not want him to be buried in the dark, but to have the light shine upon him every day.’ She gazed down sadly at the twins. ‘It was what he would have wanted.’

‘I’m glad’ Cam whispered, not trusting his voice to speak. ‘I would rather see him here under the open sky, than to spend forever existing in the dark.’

‘Come on’ Sylvia whispered gently to them, taking them carefully by the arm and pulling them away. ‘We should go inside. It’s getting cold out here.’

The boys were led back inside and taken to their rooms. It was dark at first when they entered, and it felt so cold and empty. Sylvia ordered a few of the servants (when she eventually found them) to light the hearth and bring more blankets for the princes, which they did. Once the women were gone and the boys were alone, everything became quiet again.

‘I don’t feel well’ Luke grumbled.

‘Are you sick?’ Cam asked him.

Luke turned away, brushing the tears away with his sleeve. ‘No’ he whispered. ‘I’m fine...’

He moved across the room before Cam could comfort him, dressing quickly and slipping into bed.

Cam lingered where he was for a moment longer, before following suit.

It was still chilly in the room, even with the burning fire.

Cam climbed into his bed, hugging the sheets to him and shivering, they were freezing. It took several minutes for him to warm up, and as he gazed about him at the room, a thought came to him then. He had never noticed until now how large all the rooms in the palace were, how empty and echoing and cold they felt.

Cam let out a heavy sigh, turning over to glance at his brother who lay still in bed with his back to him, seemingly fast asleep.

But Cam knew he couldn’t be asleep yet, he knew his brother would be too uneasy to give up to his dreams. Cam turned back over, and did the same as Luke. He lay there with his eyes closed, trying hard not to think of their father, and how much they missed him.

Late in the night, Sylvia sat before the burning hearth in her room and stared at the book she held. She had picked it up in the first place only to occupy herself, and to keep her mind busy. But as her eyes ran down the page following one line at a time, she realised after a few seconds that none of it had sunk in. She returned her attention to the top of the page and read the whole thing again.

Seconds later she closed the book, giving up altogether any thoughts of distraction as her mind returned to worry.

She had never been close to the king, and his death had little effect on her.

Still....

The look on the boys' faces when they approached the tomb...the way they had hugged the cold hard stone, had sobbed into it.

It was...

It was...

'Heartbreaking' Sylvia whispered.

She bowed her head, wishing there was something she could do.

'Those poor boys. What a terrible thing to happen to ones so young.'

She lifted her head, staring up at the clock that sat atop the mantelpiece, ticking away.

It was midnight.

The fire in the hearth continued to crackle low. A howling wind blew from one of the windows, and the chandelier that hung on a long black chain above her head rocked back and forth slightly.

It was too quiet, too quiet and lonely in the small room that was her sleeping quarters. The shadows above always clung to the ridiculously high ceiling, the black chain of the chandelier blending with the darkness, making it look as if the chandelier was floating.

Sylvia looked up at the shadows above her as the glass beads of the chandelier tinkled together as a light breeze rocked them. That always made her feel uneasy, as if some foul spirit lived within her room to haunt her, its home somewhere in the shadows above her, always watching over her.

Sylvia sat back in her chair in listless silence, hearing the unsettling wind around her.

An hour later, and the fire had burned down to embers, glowing red.

She looked at the ticking clock. It was one in the morning.

She didn't want to sleep, so decided suddenly to check on the boys. They would surely be fast asleep by now, but she couldn't get them out of her mind, couldn't stop thinking about them.

'Just to see if they're alright' she mumbled to herself rising.

The book slid from her lap and fell to the floor. She left it where it was, making her way to the door and leaving her room. She wandered the dark and lonely corridors, seeing not a soul in sight. The palace was not guarded during the night she knew, perhaps she thought, that was not such a good idea.

She came to the room the boys shared, opening the door quietly and peering in.

She could see little in the room itself. The fire the servants had lit had burned out now, and the cold was creeping slowly back into the room.

Sylvia left the door ajar as she stepped forwards, moving closer towards the beds. She moved to one of the beds first, seeing with shock that it was empty. She patted it down in the dark to make sure, but there could be no mistake. The other bed when she checked was empty too.

The boys were not here.

‘Luke! Cam!’ Sylvia called. Her response was only the echo of her own voice bouncing back at her, in the cold stone room. Then silence.

She instantly ran to the queen’s room, stumbling up the stairs in the dark as she hurried on. When she reached the large wooden door she banged loudly on it, calling out for the queen.

Seconds later, the door was opened by the queen’s handmaiden.

‘I’m sorry to bother you’ Sylvia huffed, still out of breath from the excursion of running up so many flights of stairs.

‘What is it Sylvia?’ Miranda asked in irritation.

From where she stood, Sylvia could see past the handmaiden, the queen sitting up in bed, rubbing her tired eyes.

‘Why do you wake me so abruptly at this hour?’ Miranda asked as her handmaiden held the door mutely. ‘What time is it?’ she asked off-handedly. ‘Gods is that the time?’ she said seeing clearer now as the tiredness left her, the large clock which sat above the door in her room. ‘What do you want?’ she huffed.

‘The boys’ Sylvia panted. ‘They are not in their rooms.’

Miranda didn’t move.

‘Neither of them? That’s a stupid question for me to ask’ she interrupted herself before the governess had a chance to speak. ‘Those boys are always together.’

‘We should look for them’ Sylvia suggested.

‘I’m sure they’re fine’ Miranda said dismissively, lying down and pulling the blankets back over her. ‘They can look after each other and themselves.’

‘They are not themselves at the moment’ Sylvia argued. ‘They’ve just lost their father. Who knows what they are thinking or what they might do. They could hurt themselves, by accident...or on purpose...’

Miranda lay on her side, staring wide-eyed at the wall before her, Sylvia’s words slowly sinking in.

The whole palace was roused then. What few guards could be called at this hour were summoned to the palace, the servants also, each running up and down the corridors and the many stairs as they searched every room for the two young princes. The entire palace was lit up in the dead of night, every fire in every room was lit, the glow from outside could be seen in the dark for miles around.

Two hours later, at three in the morning, the boys still had not been found, the many servants and few guards said that they had feverishly checked every room for them, and unless they were hiding or ignoring their calls, the boys were not in the palace.

‘What do we do?’ Sylvia worried. ‘Where could they have gone?’

Miranda frowned, still wearing her nightdress and ignoring the chill of the night, the draft howling down the corridors. She turned her back on the others, head bowed in thought.

Several servants, her handmaiden, Sylvia and a small handful of guards waited for her next command.

Miranda ignored them all.

Where could they have gone? She thought to herself. *Where? Where?*

And then she gasped suddenly as it hit her.

Miranda stiffened; body suddenly tense.

‘Your majesty?’ a soldier nearby spoke up uncertainly. ‘Are you well?’

Miranda turned to him, for a moment lost for words.

‘Come with me’ she said to the soldier at last, marching briskly away, though she didn’t say where she was heading, she walked with purpose.

‘Should we follow too your majesty?’ another soldier spoke up as she went.

‘No’ Miranda replied, ‘that is not necessary.’

‘Where are you...?’

‘It’s ok’ the queen replied, pausing only briefly to speak to Sylvia. ‘I know where they are.’

Miranda left the palace, escorted only by the single guard she had ordered to follow her. The others she had dismissed, every last one of them, and all the lights in the palace were one by one put out.

Miranda led the way, guided only by moonlight as she entered the garden at the back of the palace grounds.

Above them the sky was clear, and no clouds were visible in the cosmos, only a blanket of stars. Without the clouds to keep in the warmth, the temperate plummeted, and as Miranda walked there was mist upon her breath. Even the guard behind her, a strong and burly man, began to shiver in his armour.

Soon enough the queen found what she was looking for, and although she found what she had expected, the sight still pained her to see.

She drew a shuddering breath, tears welling in her eyes. She blinked repeatedly to keep them back before they could fall.

Before her stood the tomb of her deceased husband the king. Lying on top of the tomb fast asleep, despite the bitter chilling touch of the stone they lay on, were her two sons, her boys. Luke and Cam lay side by side on top of the hard tomb, each with one arm laid across the other. They did not stir.

Miranda’s hand lowered from her mouth and she gathered herself, drawing a deep and steady breath.

She stepped upon the pedestal which encircled the tomb, ascending slowly one step at a time. She reached a hand out to Luke who was nearest her. His skin was icy cold to the touch.

‘Luke’ she whispered to them, shaking them gently. ‘Cam.’

The boys both opened their eyes, blinking up at their mother wearily.

‘Mama?’ Cam groaned, pushing himself up.

Miranda wrapped her arms around Luke, lifting him carefully from atop the tomb and holding him close to her. She turned to the soldier behind her, handing Luke over to him. The soldier took the boy in his arms and Miranda turned back towards Cam, lifting him too.

‘You’re freezing’ she whispered down to him.

Cam silently looked up at his mother with pleading eyes.

‘Stupid boy’ she uttered, moving away from the tomb and walking back to the palace.

Following her was the soldier carrying Luke.

As they entered the palace once more, Miranda ascended the many steps, passing one of the servants by chance, and ordering her to go ahead of them, to run a bath and heat the water hot, ready for the boys. It took them so long to get there, that by the time they did, the servant had already done what was asked of her, she and the several around her.

Miranda was exhausted after walking so many steps, and carrying the boy. She placed Cam down on the ground, the soldier behind her placed Luke down too.

‘Out!’ Miranda ordered. ‘Now! All of you.’

The soldier bowed his head mutely, following after the servants as they all filed out of the room; he closed the door after him, leaving the queen alone with her sons.

‘Hurry up and get undressed’ Miranda said to them.

The boys hesitated. They stood before her shivering violently, hunched over and hugging themselves. Their cheeks were red and their lips were blue.

‘Quickly!’ Miranda ordered, clapping her hands to make them hasten.

The boys then swiftly obeyed.

The instant the boys dropped their last garment, Miranda went over to Cam and picked him up, lowering him into the wooden tub that was filled with warm soapy water, sitting by the fire. She then went over to Luke and did the same, placing him in the water in a second wooden tub a few feet away.

Luke sat back in the water, continuing to shiver for a few more seconds, before his body began to relax.

Miranda knelt beside the bath, leaning with her arms resting on the edge. She stroked Luke’s face briefly with a fingertip, glancing back at Cam to see how he was doing, before returning her attention to Luke.

‘I’m sorry for what happened’ she said to Luke, Cam listening closely behind her. ‘Truly I am. It was unfair, unjust. You did not deserve to suffer such a loss. Neither of you did’ she said, turning towards Cam again.

She rose, moving away from Luke, and kneeling beside Cam.

‘I know you both loved your father very much. But you must move on. He is gone, and he is never coming back.’ Miranda sighed then, pursing her lip and biting her cheek as Cam stared silently back at her. ‘I won’t make you sit anymore lectures. If you wish to be left alone to deal with your grief, then I will respect this need.’

‘Do you really mean it?’ Luke spoke up from behind her.

‘Yes’ Miranda glanced towards him, before facing Cam again. ‘You can do whatever you wish, as long as you promise to stay safe.’

‘We promise’ Cam mumbled. He kept his head down, but his demeanour had instantly changed at hearing this.

‘Good.’ Miranda leant forward, holding Cam and kissing him on the forehead. ‘Finish washing’ she said to them, ‘then go to bed. I don’t want to find you sleeping outside like that again. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes mama’ both boys echoed.

‘I expect to see you tomorrow evening at mealtime. Before that, do whatever you need to do to keep yourselves happy.’

She rose to her feet.

‘I am going back to bed’ she said. ‘I expect the both of you to do the same after you’ve washed. There are fresh clothes for you both on the side’ she indicated a table. ‘Goodnight, and behave yourselves.’ She swiftly left without another word.

When their mother had gone, Cam hugged himself.

‘I was so cold....’

The water he bathed in was warm, and he had heated up considerably now. The proper colour had come back to his cheeks; and he looked healthy again as he relaxed in the water.

‘Do you think she means it when she says we can do whatever we want tomorrow?’ Luke asked him.

‘I don’t know.’ Cam turned to face his brother, hugging his knees to his chest.

‘We should test it, to see if she means what she said.’

‘What do you mean?’ Cam asked him.

‘I think...’ Luke spoke slowly, ‘we should leave the palace early tomorrow morning, like we did the today. I want to see if we can find that lady again. The one dressed all in black.’

Cam suddenly lightened at this, excited at the prospect.

‘The truth is...’ Luke went on, ‘I’ve been thinking about her.’

‘I’ve been thinking about her too’ Cam said eagerly, leaning against the edge of the bathtub towards Luke. ‘I want to see her again.....I want to see Auntie.’

Luke smiled at him, like Cam his spirits had lightened too. He leant back in the bath, staring up at the ceiling.

‘Who do you think she is?’ he asked Cam.

‘I don’t know’ Cam replied. ‘But I’d love to find out.’

‘I think she’s very interesting and so mysterious’ Luke was saying. ‘Like a character out of those stories we used to hear. Do you remember?’

‘Yeah’ Cam said in a distant voice. ‘...I remember.’

Both boys left their baths when the water began to cool. They changed quickly into the dry clothes that had been left out for them and left the room, returning to their own bedroom they shared. They walked down the silent and dark corridors quietly, each holding the others hand as they moved down staircase after staircase. When they finally reached their own bedroom, they found that a servant had lit a fire in the hearth again, and the room was already warm, hot even.

The boys let go of each other’s hand.

‘I wonder what time it is’ Cam whispered, moving over towards his bed and leaning on the windowsill, staring out into the still night beyond the glass. The stars shone in the clear sky above their home, and below in the city around them, nothing moved.

‘I don’t know’ Luke whispered back, padding across the floor towards his own bed, ‘but I bet it’s late.’

‘We’ll get up early in the morning’ Cam said back to him, as Luke climbed beneath the sheets and lay down to sleep.

‘Yeah’ Luke said, as Cam too lay down to rest. ‘Before the sun rises.’

‘Goodnight brother’ Cam said to him, snuggling up into his pillow.

‘Goodnight Cam’ Luke replied, closing his eyes.

The two were fast asleep in minutes.

They woke early the next morning, as they had the morning before. But this time they did not sit together on Cam’s bed to watch the sunrise. Instead they both changed quickly into their day clothes, ready and eager to leave the palace. Though neither had had much sleep, both felt wide awake and ready to face the world.

Both were excited at the prospect of searching for the masked stranger again. If they were lucky, they might actually find her.

‘Do you think mother’s awake yet?’ Cam asked.

‘No’ Luke shook his head. ‘She gets up early but not usually this early. I doubt we’ll run into her.’

‘What if she’s coming to check on us?’ Cam worried.

Luke took his hand. ‘Well then we’d better go quickly then. She did say we could do whatever we wanted.’

Cam’s face broke into a wide grin, and for a while he forgot their sadness, feeling only the pure and innocent joy derived from the type of mischief that only children got up to.

‘Right’ he said, nodding eagerly and grasping Luke’s hand in return. ‘Let’s go.’

The boys ran quickly through the palace, down the many many stairs as they headed towards the catacombs again. The few guards they did pass they completely ignored, and who completely ignored them in return, as ever wearing distant expressions with eyes glazed over. The boys entered the catacombs, plunging into the icy river that ran below the wall, swimming towards the freedom of the outside world beyond the palace.

‘We should really bring some spare clothes down here’ Cam shivered as Luke trudged towards him, shoes soaking wet and sloshing with each footstep. ‘And some spare shoes’ Cam noted.

‘Good idea’ Luke replied, his teeth chattering as his whole body shook. ‘I know they’ll get wet if we bring them here, but they’ll dry in no time if we leave them in the sun, and will be ready for us, dry and clean next time we need them.’

‘Next time’ Cam patted his shoulder, straightening up. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Do you think we’ll really find her again?’ Luke asked, suddenly a bit doubtful. ‘What if she was only passing by? What if she doesn’t come back?’

‘Well, nothing’s lost by trying’ Cam replied confidently. ‘Now hurry up, let’s go find that cave. We can get to higher ground through there.’

Interlude start

Lucas entered the room carrying a mug of coffee. Lucas was a tall character, with jet black hair swept back and pretty blue eyes. He was incredibly handsome, just like the seven others

who lived here. As he had matured, he had grown ever more glamorous, like his brother. It was one of the reasons he had been chosen, like his brother.

He was only passing through this room as he headed to the kitchen to make himself something to eat. It was large room, with many monitors. He paused at one of the screens, seeing two young boys whom he had learnt were both aged seven, running across a beach. He watched them for a moment as they entered a cave, climbed into a tunnel that opened out onto the cliffs above the beach, where they began wandering around. He realised suddenly by their actions that they were searching.

‘They are looking for someone’ Lucas realised, speaking aloud.

He turned and called a woman’s name. The woman appeared seconds later, rushing up to the screen eagerly.

‘I think they’re looking for you’ Lucas said.

‘Oh’ the woman said, holding her hands over her heart. ‘Those poor babies.’

‘Why are they looking for you?’ Lucas asked curiously. ‘What have you been doing in that world?’

The woman’s brow knitted together in annoyance, and her head snapped towards him.

‘Where is your brother?’ she asked suddenly. ‘Why don’t you go find your brother?’

‘I don’t know where he is’ Lucas droned.

‘Why not? You two are pretty close.’

Lucas scowled at her, his expression that of disgust and annoyance. ‘He’s my brother’ Lucas said. ‘We’re not bloody married.’

‘I just thought that you might leave me alone.’

Lucas tutted, taking a sip of his coffee before speaking again.

‘I called you in here as a favour’ he spoke in a bored tone, ‘and now you’re trying to get rid of me? That’s the thanks I get...’

The woman didn’t answer; her eyes were glued to the two boys on the monitor.

Lucas glanced towards her.

‘Why do you care so much about those boys anyway?’

‘Because!’ she snapped, stubbornly. ‘Because...’ she repeated, quieter now. She breathed a heavy sigh. ‘I am unable to have children of my own...as you know...and thanks for bringing it up’ she glared at Lucas as if it were his fault.

Lucas opened his mouth to speak, but decided against it.

‘It all sort of happened by accident’ she went on. ‘I was just visiting a world, and they appeared suddenly...and when I spoke to them...’ her eyes grew distant, ‘they made me so sad.....their father had just died, their mother they said doesn’t really care for them...’

‘Well’ Lucas said casually, lifting the mug to his lips again, ‘life isn’t easy...’

‘They need someone’ she said, ‘someone who really cares for them.’

‘Why?’ Lucas asked. ‘My brother and I never had decent parents. We never knew our father and our mother...she thought we were mutants, just because we could use magic.’ He sipped his coffee some more. ‘Life’s a bitch hu?’ he said carelessly.

‘And they’re twins’ she added, ‘which makes them even *cuter*’ she continued, as if she hadn’t heard Lucas speak. Or perhaps she was trying her best to pretend he wasn’t there.

She straightened suddenly, her resolve clear.

‘I’m going to see them’ she said. ‘Where’s my cloak and gloves...? Have you seen my mask?’ she glanced about her as if they might suddenly appear. ‘Oh dam. Where did I put them?’

‘There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you’ Lucas spoke up.

‘Oh yeah?’ she scowled. ‘What’s that?’

‘How did your original body die?’ Lucas asked her.

She narrowed her eyes, gritting her teeth in annoyance.

‘None of your business’ she spat, before turning on her heel and marching away to find her mask, cloak and gloves.

‘You’d better hurry’ Lucas called after her. ‘Auntie.’

The woman paused, glaring back at him furiously. Even though she was angry, she still looked beautiful, just like the seven others who lived here with her.

Lucas smiled to himself as she marched out the room, turning back to the screen before him, where the twin boys ran back and forth, looking for ‘Auntie’.

Lucas glanced up them, lifting the mug to his lips.

‘They will never know your real name’ he said. ‘None of us will know the name your mother gave you...it’s been so long...you’ve even forgotten it yourself.’

Interlude end

‘Maybe we should wait here?’ Luke suggested when they had searched for a long time. ‘In case she turns up. I don’t want to go home yet anyway.’

‘Me neither’ Cam agreed. ‘I want to stay out here as long as possible....but...’ his hands went to his stomach. ‘I’m getting hungry.’

Cam sat down upon one of the rocks; his brother came to his side, perching on the edge beside him.

‘We should bring some food with us next time’ Luke suggested. ‘We could sneak into the kitchen and take whatever we want.’

Cam instantly lit up at this. ‘That’s a great idea’ he said eagerly. ‘We could stay out for even longer....what’s that?’ he suddenly tensed, hearing a strange noise he couldn’t identify.

Beside him Luke had frozen. The two listened silently, hearing the faint sound of movement from nearby, what seemed to be footsteps treading lightly on the gravel. And then a figure came around one of the rocks, pausing as they saw each other.

It was the same figure as the one before, with a long black cloak, black gloves and a crow’s mask that covered the face. But like the day before, the boys had learnt that more than one figure like this existed, and they could not be sure if it was the one they sought, until she spoke.

‘Children!’

She knelt with her arms open, and the boys both slid off the rock, running towards her without hesitation and hugging her tightly as she wrapped her arms around them, as if she had known them their whole lives.

‘It’s so good to see you again’ she cried happily, squeezing them tightly one last time before letting them go.

‘We were looking for you Auntie’ Luke beamed up at her.

‘I know’ Auntie replied.

‘How did you know?’ Luke asked her.

Auntie hesitated then. ‘Well’ she began; ‘there are a lot of things I know’ she finished vaguely. ‘How could I not know about you young princes?’

‘We thought for a minute’ Cam began, ‘that we wouldn’t find you.’

‘Oh don’t you worry’ Auntie squealed happily, pinching his cheeks. ‘You’ll find me if you look for me, because I will be watching over you.’

‘Like a guardian?’ Luke spoke up.

‘Like an angel?’ Cam added.

Auntie turned to each of them. ‘Yes’ she smiled behind her mask, ‘exactly like that.’

A short time later, and the three of them were walking along the coast, Auntie holding each of the boys hand in her own.

‘Go on’ Auntie was saying. ‘Tell me more about your father.’

‘He had a wicked sense of humour’ Cam gleamed slyly.

‘He was always kind’ Luke voiced.

‘Would always play jokes on us’ Cam added.

‘Do you remember the time he was reading us a bedtime story when we were younger?’ Luke asked Cam.

‘Yeah’ Cam replied, tensing slightly at the memory. ‘I think he must have been getting bored with the story he was reading’ he said with a slight smile.

‘Why do you say that?’ Auntie asked them.

‘Because he started changing the story halfway through’ Luke told her. ‘We were first hearing a story of a girl going to school for the first time, and the next thing we knew, she was running for her life! She was being chased by horrible things...with massive teeth and huge eyes!’ Luke let go of her hand to make chomping motions with his arms, snarling as he did so, pretending to be one of the beasts in the story.

‘We were a bit younger then’ Cam explained, ‘and we were getting so scared. And then he started screaming.’

‘Your father started screaming?’ Auntie echoed.

‘Yes’ Cam nodded.

‘Why?’

‘We thought there was a monster under the bed that started to eat him’ Cam replied sullenly.

‘The book he was reading flew out of his hands, and he was being pulled under the bed.....or at least that’s how it looked at first...but he was just pretending.’

‘I was so frightened’ Luke said holding himself.

‘You started crying’ Cam smirked.

‘Did not!’

‘Did too!’ Cam snapped back.

‘Boys please’ Auntie chuckled, stroking each of their heads tenderly to try and calm them.

‘Be still.’

The boys sighed, relaxing again.

‘Do you remember the time we slid on a mattress down the stairs with father?’ Luke asked Cam.

‘Or that time it snowed and we each made a snowman of ourselves’ Cam grinned back.

‘Inside the palace’ Luke added.

‘And built a snow fortress.’

‘Inside the palace.’

‘And had a snow fight.’

‘Inside the palace.’

‘It took us ages to carry all that snow’ Cam beamed, ‘but it was so cold inside that it didn’t melt.’

The two giggled together, thinking back to those fond memories, back to better times.

‘Do you remember when he let us wear that massive suit of armour?’ Cam asked his brother.

‘That was so much fun! I had to stand on your shoulders remember?’

‘The balance...’ Cam began.

‘We fell over.’

‘A lot.’

‘Remember how father laughed at that’ Luke sighed. ‘It was so heavy.’

‘Well we’ll both grow into that suit of armour one day.’

They both looked up at Auntie then.

‘We’ll be as tall as you one day’ Cam said to her.

‘Taller perhaps’ Auntie replied, and they could hear the smile in her voice as she spoke.

‘It makes me sad’ Luke mumbled. ‘I...I wish father could have watched us grow up...it would have...been nice...’

A silence passed between the boys, a silence in which their spirits dampened slightly.

‘I miss him’ Cam said miserably.

‘Does it feel good to remember him?’ Auntie asked them both.

‘It does’ Cam replied, ‘even though it makes me a bit sad...I still can’t believe he’s gone sometimes.’

‘Remember his life’ Auntie told them, ‘not his death. Just remember, that he’s not really gone. He will always be in both of your hearts. He wants you to live a happy life.’

‘Is he watching over us like you are?’ Luke asked her.

‘Yes’ Auntie nodded, smiling warmly behind the mask, ‘only...in a different way.’

‘Will we ever see him again?’ Cam asked sullenly.

‘Yes’ Auntie nodded again. ‘He is waiting for you, you will see him again when you are old and grey and have lived a long and happy life.’

‘Do you think we will?’ Cam asked her. ‘Live a long and happy life?’

‘My dear boy’ Auntie knelt before him, holding his face in her hands. ‘I am sure of it.’

The sun was beginning to set now. The boys had spent the entire day near enough outside the palace, walking slowly up the beach, along the valleys and open plains upon the cliffs. For hours and hours they had talked with Auntie, telling her all they could about themselves, their past, their desires, hopes and fears. And in that short time, Auntie had learnt more about the boys than their own mother had in all their lives.

‘Can we come and see you again?’ Luke asked her.

‘Of course’ Auntie replied, glowing with joy. ‘It would be a pleasure.’

‘How will we find you again?’ Luke voiced.

‘I will be watching over you’ Auntie replied, cupping his face. ‘If you come searching for me, then I will find you.’

She gave both boys a tight hug, before letting them go again.

‘You had better run off home’ she said. ‘Hurry now, the both of you must be starving, you haven’t eaten all day.’

It was only then, that both boys realised how hungry they were.

‘Mother said she would be waiting for us in the evening for a meal’ Cam prompted. ‘We shouldn’t be late. She might not like it.’

‘Alright’ Luke nodded. ‘Goodbye Auntie. It was nice to see you again.’

‘I’ll see you boys next time’ Auntie said to them from behind her mask. She rose to her feet, gazing down on them. ‘It was so good to see you both’ she said. ‘Don’t forget’ she added turning away, ‘I will be watching over you...’

She glided away and out of side, slipping behind a rock and vanishing.

The boys lingered where they were for a moment, watching the spot she had vanished.

‘Come on’ Cam whispered to his brother urgently. ‘Let’s go.’

Luke made to follow Cam as he ran back across the cliffs, pausing one last time to gaze after Auntie, before turning away.

They hurried along the beach and returned to the river that ran below the wall and through the catacombs, slipping into the chilly water and resurfacing once they were back inside the palace.

Cam helped his brother out of the river, pulling him to his feet. The two of them ran through the dark catacombs, entering the brighter halls within the palace. They traversed the many stairs, leaving behind them a damp trail as they went, heading back to their room to change into dry clothes quickly before heading to the dining hall to find their mother waiting for them.

‘There you boys are’ Miranda huffed, straightening slightly. ‘I was beginning to think you wouldn’t show up.’

She watched them closely as they padded slowly up to the table, each taking a seat side by side near their mother. Miranda watched them closely as they did so.

The food was already laid out on the table for them. A suckling piglet that had been slaughtered that morning especially for tonight sat on a large silver plate near them. It had already been cut into, and the smaller plates before the boys were already laden with other food alongside the meat, several different vegetables soaked in gravy with a cut apple on the side. And accompanying the meals, sat a small glass of wine, one for each of them.

They began to eat, the food was still warm.

Cam thought for a brief moment that there was too much on his plate, despite being so hungry, he doubted he would be able to eat it all.

Beside him Luke glanced askance at their mother. She had already eaten and finished her own food, and was now watching them silently. The three of them were alone in the hall together, not even the queen’s handmaiden was present at this time.

The hall around them was large and empty, save for the long table in the middle, and the massive burning hearth that crackled behind where their mother sat. On the other side of the

hearth the kitchen could be glimpsed through the dancing flames. It was a large kitchen, like the hall. At certain times of the day was a hive of activity. Now it was deserted and dark.

Miranda watched her sons eat slowly. She sighed heavily; then she yawned.

‘Did you have fun today with whatever you got up to?’ she asked them.

The boys hesitated, glancing at each other, reluctant to answer.

‘Well?’ She prompted.

‘Yes mother’ Cam answered.

‘Hmm.’ She rose to her feet, hands down upon the table. ‘You’ll go straight to bed after this’ she spoke firmly to them, ‘won’t you.’

It wasn’t a question.

‘I don’t want you leaving the palace in the middle of the night’ she continued. ‘Visit your father’s grave if you must, but I don’t want to find you out in the freezing cold again, do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes mother’ both boys mumble to their plates.

‘Good. If I do find you doing that again...or anything else equally as stupid, I’ll make you wish you hadn’t.’ She took her hands from the table and strode away without another word, sighing heavily, taking her wig and gloves off as she made her way to the door. She snapped it shut behind her.

‘I’m feeling really tired’ Cam said to his brother when silence rang in the hall.

‘Me too’ Luke grumbled, poking his food with his fork and chasing it in circles around the plate. ‘We *should* go to bed after this’ he said mournfully. ‘I don’t think either of us has had enough sleep.’

‘I think you’re right’ Cam murmured. He sipped a bit of wine. It tasted good.

The twins ate the rest of their meal in silence, before pushing their plates away and heading back to their room.

Exhausted, they climbed into bed, and were asleep in seconds.

Miranda stomped heavily up the stairs, holding the banister with one hand; with the other she held her wig and her long gloves, swinging them back and forth as she walked.

She was huffing and puffing by the time she at last reached her room several floors above. She opened the door, standing in the doorway hesitant for a moment as she saw her handmaiden waiting obediently for her, head bowed and hands together before her. The fire in her room was already lit and the room had been tidied. Everything that had been broken inside it had either been fixed or replaced altogether.

Although she kept it hidden, Miranda was prone to episodes of uncontrollable anger. She never hurt anyone other than herself; she had never laid a hand on her handmaiden, though she had every right. And if it wasn’t uncontrollable anger she suffered, it was profound misery and despair.

That is why she cut herself.

On more than one occasion, and more often in recent days, Miranda would be reduced to a bawling wreck curled up on the floor. Her handmaiden would hold her and try her best to comfort her. For what little good her efforts were.

‘Are you alright Clara?’ Miranda asked her handmaiden offhandedly.

‘Yes my mistress’ Clara bowed obediently.

‘Look at me when you’re talking to me’ Miranda sighed wearily, stepping into the room and letting the door swing shut behind her. ‘Gods above, some might think I beat you’ she huffed, throwing her wig and gloves upon the dresser and slumping back in the chair.

‘I’m sorry your majesty...’ Clara began meeting her gaze now, ‘but I have some news you’re not going to like.’

‘Out with it then’ Miranda droned.

‘The council are holding a meeting now in the palace. They are waiting for your arrival to begin.’

‘Here?’ Miranda asked. ‘In the palace?’

‘Yes. They came to your room to find you. I’ve been here the whole time...so...I spoke to them in your stead.’

‘I thought they were supposed to hold their meetings in the council office where they belong’ Miranda grumbled.

‘They say they need to be closer to the palace now that the king is dead’ Clara replied meekly.

Miranda’s eye twitched in annoyance at that.

‘Tell me’ the queen said to her handmaiden, ‘is it in my right to have them all hanged?’

‘I’m afraid not. There are too many among them who are powerful, rich...have the support of the people. If something were to happen...well...’ she shrugged. ‘They would know it was you. You’d be hanged for sure, and they wouldn’t waste their time about it. I doubt you would even get a trial, and the people wouldn’t support you. Not without their king to back you up.’

‘Is that all it boils down to?’ Miranda tilted her head, staring at her own reflection in the mirror upon the dresser. ‘Without my husband I am nothing? Hu.’ She clicked her fingers at Clara. ‘Get me a drink.’

Clara hurried off, returning seconds later with a bottle of whisky.

‘Do you think they would really hang me if I tried to kill any of them?’ Miranda asked her handmaiden carelessly, unscrewing the bottle.

‘It’s almost a certainty’ Clara replied. ‘...Sorry...’

‘Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad’ Miranda said, lifting the bottle to her lips and drinking deeply.

‘You shouldn’t say things like that’ Clara spoke softly.

‘Why? It’s how I feel.’

‘But what about your sons?’

‘What about them?’ Miranda asked, leaning further back in her chair and resting her feet upon the dresser before her in a very unladylike fashion.

‘Well...don’t you love them at all?’

Miranda’s eyes grew distant, as she allowed her vision to slip out of focus.

‘I feel nothing for them’ she answered after a time. ‘They are good boys...but...’ she lowered her head, resting the bottle on her lap. ‘I never wanted them in the first place...’

A heavy silence fell between them. The only sound that could be heard was the crackle of the fire in the hearth.

It was warm in the room, there were no windows here; too much draft came into the rooms from them. Miranda remembered her old room before she moved to this one, the room she

shared with her husband before he got sick. It was a large room, empty and cold. Miranda would often wake several times in the night because of a terrible chill that ran through her body. Any other couple would have snuggled together. But Miranda felt no love for her husband. She never had, not ever.

‘It’s horrible being queen’ Miranda said to Clara after a time. She laughed suddenly, turning her eyes onto Clara. ‘Do you know what I would give to switch places with you? I would give my own children if I could, and more. I would give the palace itself if it belonged to me.’

Clara only watched her silently as she spoke, her eyes wide.

‘You’re so beautiful’ Miranda said suddenly to her handmaiden leaning towards her, taking in every feature. ‘Tell me, have you ever been with a man?’

Clara blushed furiously at this.

‘I...’ she began. ‘I mean...yes...once...’

‘Did you like it?’

‘What?’

‘You heard me’ Miranda replied shortly. ‘Who was he? Or gods forbid she?’

Clara blushed further at this.

‘I’m going to assume it was a he’ Miranda continued, sitting back in her chair. ‘Was he good? Did he make you happy?’

Clara took a deep breath.

‘He was a childhood friend’ she began. ‘Things changed as we grew older; we grew closer...and...’

‘Go on’ Miranda prompted. ‘I want to hear this.’

‘It was only a brief love’ Clara spoke to the floor. ‘His parents moved away, and he went with them, but...’

‘I don’t want to hear about that’ Miranda waved away. ‘When was the first time he touched you?’

Clara looked up at her.

‘It was...in secret’ she began reluctantly, ‘at night. I...I didn’t intend for it to happen, I didn’t know it was going to happen...but...one thing led to another...’

‘Go on’ Miranda prompted.

‘He used to paint for me. He was a wonderful painter. There was a barn my father owned, he used to sit there in the rafters and paint the view of the town from the window. One evening, I was tending to the horses and I saw him there.’ She paused for a moment to smile. ‘He showed me the picture he was painting. It was beautiful. And then he said he wanted to paint me...and then....and then...’

‘Yes?’

‘He reached out and touched my cheek’ Clara said, touching her own cheek as if she could still feel him. ‘I remember’ she continued, ‘how my heart started to race. I loved him. I had loved him for a long time.’

‘Did you do it?’ Miranda asked her. ‘In the barn with the horses?’

Clara took a few seconds for the answer. ‘Yes’ she replied quietly.

‘Did it feel good?’ Miranda asked her.

‘Yes’ Clara asked again. ‘He was...so gentle...so...loving...’

‘Hmp’ Miranda smirked, taking another swig from the bottle. ‘That’s good. I’m sorry though it didn’t work out.’

‘We still keep in touch’ Clara told her. ‘I am hoping to see him again one day, when the circumstances....’ She trailed off. ‘He sends letters to me often.’

‘And you send letters back to him?’

‘Yes.’

Miranda swirled the whisky in the bottle, staring down at the liquid sloshing around.

‘That’s good. I’m afraid my story isn’t anywhere near as pleasant.’ She took another swig from the bottle, falling silent for a minute or so before speaking. ‘I was sold like cattle by my father to a man I’d never met before, the king you all know so well and love.’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘Carl.’ She took another swing. ‘He is dead’ she said. ‘My husband the king is dead, and I feel no sorrow for it.’

Clara listened silently as the queen continued to speak.

‘He was kind to me’ the queen said, ‘he tried to be patient, but I never loved him. I always refused his advances, no matter how much they were buttered with gifts or glazed with romantic lies. I knew he didn’t love me in return, how could he, me being the way I was?’ She put the bottle down, resting it carefully on the floor beside her chair. ‘For years I managed to keep a distance between us, even in the bed I shared with him. I wanted nothing to do with him.’ Miranda’s tone was dead as she spoke, without emotion. It was almost as if she were reciting someone else’s life and not her own. ‘For years he wanted a son, a child to carry on his name, and with each year I failed to get pregnant...well...’ she bowed her head. ‘People talk...you know? Rumours began to circulate about me being sterile. I wish it were that simple. I wish I *were* sterile, but the truth is, year after year I refused him.’ She sighed heavily then. ‘In the end the king lost patience, he....’ Miranda drew a deep breath, heart racing at the memory. ‘He raped me.’ She took another breath. ‘It happened every single night, until I became pregnant.’ She reached for the bottle again. ‘He never touched me again after that.’ She laughed then. ‘Twins.’ She shook her head. ‘What are the odds?’

‘That’s why you feel no love for the boys?’ Clara asked.

‘They are good boys’ Miranda said again, ‘but like my husband, I feel no love for them. I’ve tried to feel *something* for them, as I had with my husband in the past. I thought a mother would naturally feel a bond with her children; or that it might grow with time...’ Miranda shook her head. ‘But no...’ she said, ‘nothing ever came.’ She blinked slowly. ‘There is no one in this world I really care about’ she spoke in a distant voice. ‘I am alone.....and that was my life. Trapped in a love-less marriage wishing everyday I’d been born a man.’

She turned her head, staring into the fire.

‘I wish’ Miranda began, ‘I wish with all my heart and soul...that I was not living this life, that I had different parents that would not sell me, that would have wanted to keep in contact with me, had wanted to know me...but...’ she trailed off them. ‘They were as good parents to me as I am to my own children. My boys haven’t even met them...I’m sure they don’t even know their names...’ she took another deep swig. The bottle was nearly empty now, but Miranda was not affected. She often drank like this.

‘You should speak with the council’ Clara said quietly. ‘They are waiting for you.’

Miranda smirked again. 'So, it's already begun' she whispered. 'Already they are preparing to claw at my throat and fight for the power my husband left behind. If only that power fell to me...but...' she huffed miserably, shaking her head. 'I wish I had been born a man.'

She rose to her feet, placing back on her head the beautiful blonde wig, covering her natural uneven black hair she had cut short herself. She then slipped the long gloves back on. The gloves reached far up her arms and past her elbows. They hid the scars well.

Miranda straightened, staring at the mirror before her.

'They call me queen' she said to her reflection, 'yet I am nothing without a husband.'

She left the room to make her way onwards marching down the corridor, dread filling her with every step as she drew closer. Clara remained in the room left behind, waiting patiently for her mistress to return.

Miranda walked up and down several flights of stairs before reaching the tall double doors that led to the new council chamber.

She stopped before them, her face inches away from the wood.

She drew a deep breath, placing her hands upon the handle, and pushing the doors open.

The eyes of the council members within all turned to her at once, and whatever discussions they had been having quickly subsided.

'Your majesty' one man spoke up. 'We've been waiting for you.'

'What's the meaning of holding a meeting so late and with so little warning' the queen demanded, 'and who said it was acceptable for you to use the palace as a place to hold council?'

'There is no one suitable to ask' one man leant forwards. 'The king is dead. There is no authority over us now.'

Miranda did not miss the jibe.

'It is imperative that we hold this meeting' another man spoke as Miranda closed the doors behind her and made her way to the only empty seat left now at the circular table. 'We have many important matters to discuss with you.'

Miranda sat carefully in the high-backed chair, leaning back with a hand resting on the dark wood of the table before her.

She surveyed the men around her.

The council consisted of two sides. The right hand of the king, and the left hand of the king. They were advisors, and helped the king deal with many of the problems that arose with ruling a kingdom. One hand managed the people, and everything related to 'home', the other hand dealt with all foreign affairs, such as the army and keeping peace with neighbouring kingdoms.

Neither side had any clear roles or motive. They were grey.

The right hand of the king, was a group that comprised of twenty one members, they were partly religiously motivated, and slightly stronger than the group of men that made up the left hand of the king, which comprised of nineteen members. The two sides of the council were made up of mostly old men, but here and there; Miranda could see younger faces staring back at her.

Miranda cast her eyes over them, taking in each detail of their faces, remembering every single one of them. She felt knowing them was more important now than it had ever been.

Know your enemies Miranda thought, the only good advice her parents had given her before shipping her off to marry her husband. *Know your enemies, and trust no one.*

All forty members of the council were here, with the queen here now, that made forty one people within the hall, and yet not a single sound could be heard, not even a breath or a rustle of clothing.

Miranda drew a heavy sigh, waiting for the first man to speak.

‘I think we’ll get right to the point’ Sulley began. ‘We’re all very busy and I’m sure there are other places we’d rather been. My queen’ he said, turning to her. ‘We’ve come to the decision, and I’m sure we all know that it’s the best thing to do, after all...with the way things are going...’

‘Get to the point’ Miranda said flatly.

The man looked irritated that he had been interrupted, but Miranda didn’t care.

‘We’ve come to the decision, that the queen’ he spoke to her as if she weren’t there, ‘cannot rule on her own. Her sons the princes are far too young to rule, and so we’ve come to the decision, that such a thing now falls into the hands of the council. We will fill the empty space the king has left.

‘You made this decision without me?’ Miranda asked.

‘It was the best thing to do’ Mellor told her firmly, speaking in support of Sulley. ‘We have much work to do. From now on, members of the council will be living in the palace, just to help run things, and for simplicity’s sake. After all’ he said, ‘a woman cannot rule alone.’

So, Miranda thought bitterly, her mind drifting to thoughts for her children who where fast asleep in their beds, *it has already begun...*

Chapter Four

The next morning the twins woke early, long before the sun had risen. They scattered down the corridors eagerly, running side by side as they headed towards the catacombs, bringing with them several changes of clothes, some to leave in the catacombs, some to leave outside on the beach. They hadn’t expected to run into anyone, other than the occasional statue-like guards who blended in so well with the walls around them. They had run down several flights of stairs, before meeting their first stranger that day.

Cam slid to a stop suddenly, causing Luke to run into the back of him. Cam grabbed Luke’s arm to support him, and the two stared up at the man who glared down at them both.

He was a tall muscular man in his thirties. His fine clothes didn’t exactly fit his build; Cam thought briefly he would be far better suited wearing armour. The man had a piercing stare, and a frightening demeanour.

Cam couldn’t help himself shrinking slightly back from him, behind him he felt Luke do the same.

The man didn’t move. He didn’t react in any way, only continued to stare.

After a few seconds passed, Cam straightened up, drawing a deep and steady breath.

‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’ he spoke bravely.

The man didn't answer, he continued to remain still. Then a voice from around the corner called out.

'Brioke?!'

Another stranger appeared, a man, this one slightly younger and leaner. His fine clothes seemed to suit him far better than the ones the man that stood before them wore.

'Oh' the younger man said approaching them. 'It's the young princes. Hello. Good morning' he smiled. 'I wasn't expecting to see you today. What are the odds of running into you in a big palace like this? My name is Saidear by the way. I am one of the left hands of the king.'

Cam and Luke watched the younger figure with silent suspicion. The both of them tensed suddenly as several more male figures appeared from around the corner a short distance away, all similarly dressed in the same fine and expensive looking clothes.

'What's going on here?' Cam spoke out loud as the small crowd passed them, heading into one of the rooms nearby. 'Who are you all?'

'We are members of the council' Saidear replied, smiling and placing a hand respectfully over his heart as he bowed low to the boys. 'You will be seeing a lot more of us I'm afraid' he said. 'Since your father....' He broke off with a sad smile. 'We will be doing the work he left behind.'

'Why can't mother do it?' Cam demanded.

'It is not proper for a woman to do such work' Saidear replied.

'Why?'

'Well...' Saidear replied uncertainly, 'because...she's a woman.'

'That's stupid' Cam answered shortly.

Saidear smiled again. 'Stupid' he nodded in agreement, 'but that is the way it is. Now you must excuse us.' He bowed again before speaking to the older man that stood beside him, who had not said a single word, but had continued to stare. 'Come on Brioke. There's much for us to do.'

Brioke's eyes lingered for a few more seconds on the boys, before he turned away in silence, following the younger gentleman down the corridor and through the door.

'What was all that about?' Luke mumbled, standing behind his brother and grasping onto his shoulders. 'That man was scary.'

'Yeah' Cam agreed. 'He was.'

Cam turned back to Luke, grabbing his arm and running with him. 'Come on, let's keep going.'

They entered the catacombs; leaving behind some of the clothes they had brought with them, and swam up the river as they had the day before, breaking the surface once they passed the wall, and entering the outside world once more.

It was another beautiful day. The sky was clear, the sun shone brightly in the early morning, and though the water was cool it was not chilly enough to be uncomfortable. Cam and Luke placed the rest of the clothes they carried upon the rocks to dry.

The boys ran side by side across the beach, their warm bodies quickly heating their clothes, and by the time they met *her* again, they were almost completely dry.

'Auntie!' both boys cried running to her.

'Children!'

She knelt as they drew closer, catching them both in a tight embrace.

‘Have you boys been good?’ she beamed at them from behind her crows mask.
‘We’re always good’ Luke smiled.
‘No no’ Cam argued. ‘We’re always bad. Remember?’
‘Oh you boys’ Auntie giggled, hugging them again tightly. ‘You’re both so *cute!*’

Interlude start

From the control room, Lucas watched. Standing before the monitor with his coffee in his hand, he stared.

‘What *are* you doing?’ he spoke to the woman on the screen, though she couldn’t hear him. He took another sip of his coffee. ‘Auntie.’ He smirked, shaking his head.

‘Are you alright Lucas?’ another figure asked approaching him.

Lucas half-turned to the man behind him. His brother Reuben.

‘Yeah’ he said turning back to the screen.’

‘What’s she doing?’ Reuben asked, leaning upon the controls and staring at the monitor before them.

‘Beats me’ Lucas shrugged. ‘She seems to be getting very attached to those boys.’

‘Hm’ Reuben said. He straightened. ‘Want to visit a world with me?’

‘When?’

‘Now.’

Lucas hesitated for a moment. ‘Sure’ he answered after a time.

He put his coffee down on the controls before them.

‘Let me just get my stuff.’

Lucas went into the other room, taking his long black hooded cloak, one of many hanging up upon the wall, and his gloves also, putting them both on. Beside him Reuben was doing the same, raising his hood over his head. Every inch of their skin was covered now, besides their faces.

‘Are you ready?’ Lucas asked his brother.

‘Yeah’ Reuben nodded.

They both lifted the plague masks to their faces. The masks they wore were both identical. Black with a long beak like a crow’s, and large eyes like glass windows, behind which nothing could be seen, only what was reflected.

‘What a strange tradition we eight have’ Reuben commented, glancing at his brother who was now indistinguishable from him.

‘It sure is’ Lucas agreed. ‘Now let’s go.’

Interlude end

Miranda stared down at the small man, trying to fight back the sneer on her lips. Behind her, her handmaiden Clara stood obediently with her head down and her hands folded before her. 'You held a meeting without me?' Miranda demanded of the council member, as others behind him filled wordlessly out of the new council chambers. She had chosen to speak to this one in particular, because he was one of the youngest.

'I'm sorry' Percival said without sounding sorry at all. 'But we had some important matters that needed to be discussed right away.'

'You held a meeting' Miranda repeated stubbornly, 'without me.'

'Without trying to be blunt' Percival said, 'what good is it to have you present anyway? You have not authority or power in any decisions; it wouldn't even be worth voicing an opinion.'

'I am the queen!' Miranda said, raising her voice now. 'If something is going to be changed anywhere I want to know about it. This is still my kingdom. From now on, I want to be included in *every* meeting.'

Percival narrowed his eyes, making a shape with his mouth as if thinking hard how best to respond. He decided that appeasing her would be best, at least for the meantime.

'As you wish my queen' he bowed.

He was interrupted then by his servant, a young boy who hurried up to him, cheeks flushed and panting as he had run up several flights of stairs to find his master.

'What is it boy?' Percival spoke harshly to him.

'My lord' the servant puffed. 'Did you want all six chests to be brought to your room?'

'I already said yes didn't I? Now hurry up and get the job done. I need those chests; they have all my books in them.'

'And why are you moving in?' the queen asked him as the servant boy scurried off again, still panting.

'We told you we had to be close to the palace now' Percival replied. 'What better idea than to live at the palace itself?'

'You're staying for a long time then?'

'There is a lot of work to do' Percival replied with a glint in his eyes that Miranda didn't like.

'You knew about this already.'

'But I didn't think it would happen so soon' Miranda spoke flatly.

'And what better time than the present?' Percival replied, giving the queen a smile that made her want to stab him in the face and wipe that grin off for good.

The queen didn't even bother trying to make the effort at courtesies anymore. She had grown tired of these false manners long ago, had grown tired of pretending to care. Instead she turned on her heel and stormed off, muttering a single word under her breath.

'Bollocks.'

'So where do you live?' Luke asked.

'My home' Auntie smiled behind her mask, 'is a very long way from here. If you were to spend your entire life walking, you would never reach it, not if you lived for a thousand million years. Not even if you lived forever.'

'Is it really that far away?' Cam gasped in wide-eyed awe.

'Yes' Auntie nodded.

‘What else?’

‘Well’ Auntie thought aloud. ‘It’s large, and beautiful. Everything is perfect, not a single grass out of place, every tree is where it should be, the sky is always clear.’ Auntie smiled kindly. ‘It never rains’ she continued, ‘it’s never too hot or too cold, but perfect all the time.’

‘It sounds really nice’ Luke said quietly as he held her hand. Cam on her other side held her other hand, and the three once again walked slowly across the cliffs that overlooked the beaches.

‘Does your family live there?’ Cam asked her.

‘My family?’ Auntie repeated curiously. She hummed thoughtfully to herself, letting go of the boy’s and turning to sit upon one of the rocks. ‘I suppose you could call them my family, though we are not related by blood. There are eight of us in total, including myself.’

They spent hours that day simply talking with Auntie, getting to know her better, as she had gotten to know them the day before. But the sun was late in the sky, and the boys knew they had to go home soon.

‘You’ll come back here wont you?’ Auntie asked them. ‘You’ll come back again to see me.’

‘Will you be here waiting for us?’ Luke asked her.

‘Yes’ Auntie whispered. ‘I will always be here if you come looking for me. Just wait and I shall appear.’

‘Do you promise?’ Cam spoke.

Auntie leant forwards, placing a gentle hand upon each of their heads.

‘I promise’ she breathed. ‘Always.’

She gave them both a quick hug, squeezing them tightly as they hugged her back.

‘Now go’ she said straightening up and turning to drift away. ‘Your mother will be wondering where you are.’

The boys both watched her go reluctantly, wishing she would stay, wishing they could spend just a little longer with her. But they knew they had to go home eventually, and so they turned their backs and headed down towards the beach, and to the river that ran beneath the wall and through catacombs.

‘Where the fuck are those boys?’ Miranda snapped.

‘I don’t know your majesty’ her handmaiden Clara bowed submissively as she hurried after her.

‘This is most concerning indeed’ Miranda muttered beneath her breath. ‘The bloody council is invading my very home...I need to keep those boys closer to me from now on...they may be in danger...’ she halted suddenly, hand going to her forehead, brow wrinkled. ‘I need to think...’ she hissed between her teeth, ‘...in need to think...’ She grimaced suddenly, as if she were in pain. ‘*Where are those boys?*’

She found them several hours later sitting in their room, acting as if they had been there all along.

‘Where were you?’ Miranda growled at them the instant she saw them there, storming in and slamming the door behind her. ‘I was looking for you both for *ages*.’

‘We were...’ Luke began, still a little startled by her sudden appearance. ‘Umm...we were...’

‘Playing hid and seek’ Cam finished.

The boys shared a brief glance, before looking back at their mother.

‘Well that’s not obviously a lie’ she snapped, hands on her hips. ‘Boys I need to tell you something. From now on you need to stay close to the palace and never leave, and stay away from the council members....no...even the soldiers that protect the palace. Remember that from now on you can trust *no one*, no one besides myself, my handmaiden and Sylvia, your governess. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes mother’ the boys echoed, speaking mechanically.

Miranda leant forward, placing a firm hand on each of the boy’s shoulders and gripping firmly, until it hurt them.

‘We’re living in dangerous times’ she spoke to them in a whisper. ‘We have to be careful. *All* of us. Do you understand? We can trust *no one*.’

‘Yes mother.’

‘Never let your guard down’ the queen narrowed her eyes. ‘They are all our enemy; they are all willing to hurt us. Protect yourselves, and be strong.’

Chapter Five

In the days that followed, the twins would see more and more of the council members wandering through their home. And heeding their mother’s word, they kept well away from all of them, running the opposite direction the moment one of them would appear, even the guards, who had before been nothing to the boys but interesting decorations now made them uneasy.

The truth was, they were scared.

The way their mother had grasped their shoulder so tightly, the urgency in her voice and the way she spoken with her eyes wide as if *she* were afraid, terrified them. They had never known their mother to be afraid of anything, but she certainly was now. They could see it, plain as day. Though she tried her best to hide it.

But they forgot their fears, each time they left the palace to see *her*.

‘Auntie!’ both boys cried, running into her open arms.

She embraced them lovingly, snuggling into them and holding them tenderly, like a mother would do, in a way their own mother had never done.

‘Hey’ Auntie whispered excitedly from behind her plague mask. ‘I have a present for you both.’

‘What is it?’ Cam and Luke asked excitedly in unison.

Auntie skipped away happily, moving behind one of the rocks where she hid the present. She pulled it out to show them, and Cam and Luke stared at it in surprise and confusion.

It was a car tyre, though they had never seen such a thing before.

‘What is it?’ Cam asked.

‘We’re going to make it into a swing’ Auntie replied in a sing-song voice.

‘Yeah but...what is it?’ Cam asked again, still curious. He reached out and poked it, then squeezed the rubber between his fingers. ‘It feels weird’ Cam said, as Luke reached out to do the same.

‘It...’ Auntie hesitated; then smiled again behind her mask. ‘It’s a special thing’ she replied simply. ‘I got it from a special place.’ She hugged the tyre, bouncing on the spot happily in a childish manner. ‘You boys are going to help me built a tree house!’ she giggled. ‘That’s where I got this from’ she explained, ‘a tree house building shop.....a *long* way from here.’

Interlude start

Lucas laughed out loud, Auntie and the adorable twin boys showed clearly on the monitor before him.

‘What are you laughing at?’ Reuben asked him, glancing up from his book from where he sat nearby.

‘This one’ Lucas indicated the masked figure on the screen, ‘just look at her.’

Reuben put his book down, tilting his head up at the monitor. ‘She does love those boys doesn’t she? It’s a shame she can’t have any of her own.’ He lifted the book again. ‘She would have made a wonderful mother.’

‘How’s the book?’ Lucas asked him.

‘Really funny’ Reuben answered. He scanned the pages reading out loud.

‘Any ideas?’ Malvery prompted.

‘Jump?’ suggested Frey. ‘There’s no way they’d be stupid enough to follow us.’

‘Yeah, we’d certainly out-stupid them with that plan.’ Malvery rolled up his sleeves. ‘Fine. Let’s do it.’

Lucas smiled, resting his cheek on his closed fist. He turned back towards the monitor, and watched.

Interlude end

‘How do you travel so fast?’ Luke asked her.

‘I have special abilities’ Auntie whispered to him, lifting his chin with a hand and caressing his cheeks tenderly. ‘Maybe one day I’ll show you, maybe...when you’re a little older.’ Her hand went to Cam then, ruffling his black hair affectionately. ‘I can’t wait to see you boys all grown up’ she gleamed. ‘You’re both going to be so handsome; all the girls will be fawning over you.’

She straightened.

‘Come with me’ she said. ‘I’ve got more fun things we can use to build the tree house. That’s what we’re going to do today. Won’t that be fun?’

The boys bounded after her, moving a short distance away towards the tree she had picked out, a sizable tree set apart from the others that grew nearby. Around the bottom of the tree

were piled a variety of different materials, rope, lengths of wood, a hammer and a box of nails, corrugated iron and more tyres.

Auntie put down the tyre she carried as the twins began to run around the tree, eyes and hands roving all over the materials before them, picking them up eagerly and examining them. Auntie grabbed one of the twins, Luke who happened to be the one passing her by at that time, and gave him a squeeze. Luke squealed and giggled and tried to squirm away. Auntie only began to tickle him even harder. Cam leapt at her from behind, jumping up and hugging her around the shoulders as he pretended to attack her, roaring furiously as he did. Auntie laughed out loud, dropping Luke who landed on his feet, and reaching over her shoulder to try to reach Cam. She grabbed him, pulling him around her body and holding him in her arms.

She stared down at him, Cam stared back at her, gazing at the large round eyes in her mask, the windows, and seeing only his own reflection gazing back at him. The mask was black like the rest of what she wore, the beak protruding far, her black hood raised and hands covered by black gloves.

Auntie put Cam down slowly; he never took his eyes off her, as she placed him to stand next to his brother.

‘Why do you wear that mask?’ Cam asked her.

‘This?’ Auntie said, hand touching the beak lightly. ‘I...’ she began. ‘It’s just what we do.’

‘What do you look like underneath?’ Luke asked her. ‘We want to see.’

Auntie hesitated; the boys watched their own reflections in the windows as they waited for her response.

‘Please?’ Cam begged nicely. ‘We’re really curious. We want to see what you look like.’

‘Alright’ Auntie relented. ‘I’ll take this off.’

She took the gloves off, one after the other, then lifting her hands she lowered the hood. She touched a hand to her mask, fingers splayed over the face, and removed it slowly, slipping it back over her head.

Cam and Luke both gasped slowly at the sight of her, unable to tear their eyes away.

She was beautiful.

Her features were dramatic, striking, spectacular. Perfect. Her skin was flawless, eyes large and lips full. Not a single hair was out of place.

She was almost, too perfect, almost as if she had been designed, created by the very gods themselves.

Both boys smiled as Auntie breathed a sigh of relief, blinking slowly.

‘That’s better’ she said. ‘I can see you both clearly now.’

They spent the rest of that day building the tree house together. Auntie helped the boys, and the boys helped her. They worked for hours without rest, but did not go hungry. Auntie had lots of food with her, food they had not seen before, food she had brought with her from her home, so she claimed. It was delicious. Both boys enjoyed it; they finished off every morsel with Auntie’s help. Afterwards, the three of them sat for a while at the base of the tree, staring out over the cliff at the gentle sea beyond, listening to the cry of the seagulls. Auntie lifted her head, resting back against the trunk. Above their heads, she saw something different, a bird like the others, but much larger, with narrower wings. It was an albatross.

‘I like this world’ Auntie said, breaking the silence. ‘It’s...so beautiful.’

‘I wish you could stay here’ Luke said to her. ‘I love being here with you.’

‘Me too’ Cam said. ‘Why can’t you stay?’

‘Oh you boys’ Auntie sighed. ‘I would love to...’

‘It would be so much fun if you could live in the palace with us’ Cam said. ‘There’s plenty of space.’

‘I can’t’ Auntie said mournfully. ‘I am not.....I don’t belong there.’

‘Why not?’ Luke asked sadly. ‘We love having you here.’

Auntie stared at Luke for a moment, before sighing happily, smiling at the boy. ‘I doubt your mother would let a stranger just move into the palace. It...wouldn’t be right.’

‘I...suppose you’re right’ Luke said regretfully, slumping back against the tree.

‘It’s ok though’ Auntie said. ‘You can see me whenever you want. I will always be here when you come looking for me. Always.’

‘Do you live near here then?’ Cam asked her.

Auntie hesitated; then smiled again. She simply ruffled his hair.

‘Come on’ she said. ‘Let’s finish building this tree house.’

It took several more hours to finish what they had started. It wouldn’t have taken so long, but they were having so much fun along the way, stopping every few minutes to mess around and play their games. But at long last, the tree house was complete.

‘There’ Auntie said, straightening up and grinning widely.

‘It looks great!’ Luke beamed, jumping up and down excitedly.

‘I can’t wait to come back here tomorrow’ Cam said, clambering awkwardly onto the tyre swing and rocking back and forth. ‘I wish we had time to play today, but it’s starting to get dark’ he noticed with regret, looking up at the sky. And then he gasped, suddenly realising. ‘It’s starting to get late’ he repeated more urgently.

Luke beside him had stiffened; the brothers exchanged a nervous glance.

‘We had better go back’ Cam said tentatively, getting off the tyre slowly.

‘Will you be here tomorrow?’ Luke asked her.

‘Of course’ Auntie said kneeling and embracing Luke, then Cam in turn. ‘Hurry home boys’ she whispered. ‘I will see you tomorrow.’

‘Bye’ Cam said meekly at her.

‘Bye’ Luke echoed.

They turned from her and ran away, back down the cliff and across the beach, moving as fast as they could and heading back to the catacombs. One after the other they jumped into the river, resurfacing again when they were back inside the palace.

The moment they passed inside its walls, their moods changed. Their home was not the same as it was before, everything felt different after the council had moved in. While the boys still did their best to avoid everyone besides their mother, her handmaiden and Sylvia, the strangers were still around. Each time they came home, the boys were reminded of their presence, everyday.

Today they saw him, Brioke, the man who had stared at them the day before, the man that had frightened them so. He only passed by them, but both boys noticed his stare linger on them just a little too long. And then he was gone

Luke unconsciously clung onto Cam’s arm.

I don't like him' Luke whispered. 'Let's go back to our room.'

Cam turned to him. 'Yeah.'

They moved quickly through the corridors, keeping their heads down. When they opened the door to their bedroom, they found their mother waiting for them, lying back on one of the beds resting. She sat up when they entered.

'Where have you boys been?' she asked exasperated. 'Where do you keep going?'

Cam and Luke both averted their gaze, staring at the floor. Miranda narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

She rose to her feet, gliding forwards and towering over them.

'You two have been up to something' Miranda said with a sneer on her lips. 'Where have you been?'

'Nowhere!' Cam shot.

'Don't raise your voice to me' Miranda spoke dangerously. 'And you're lying.'

'No' Luke answered feebly. 'We're not.'

Miranda tutted, simply moving past them as she headed towards the door. 'I want the both of you to stay here in this room until the morning. That dam council....' She grimaced, sneering and baring her teeth in silence. She left without even bothering to finish her sentence.

The boys watched their mother as she went, leaving the door open behind her.

Luke moved towards it, closing it quietly. He turned to Cam who watched him uncertainly.

'I don't like this' Luke said to him. 'Cam...I'm scared.'

'Me too' Cam said, his voice wavering.

Luke buried his face in his hands, crying suddenly.

'Luke?' Cam worried. 'Luke. What's wrong?'

'I....' Luke sobbed. 'I miss father!'

Cam felt tears prickle in his own eyes at this, he watched as his brother cried.

'Luke' he said, grasping him by the shoulders and shaking him. 'Please don't...we have to be strong....it's what father would have wanted...'

'I wish he was here now' Luke whispered. 'Why...why did he have to die?'

'I don't know' Cam said, holding his brother close. 'I know it's not fair, but we can't change what happened.'

'Why did father have to die?' Luke asked hopelessly, 'why couldn't mother...why couldn't mother...'

Cam's eyes flashed. 'Don't say things like that' he snapped. 'Don't...'

Luke cried openly now, hugging his brother tightly as Cam held him too, blinking furiously, trying his hardest to fight back his tears.

'Things are different now' Cam told Luke, his voice trembling. 'Things...are never going to be the same again.' He squeezed his brother tighter, eyes wide and unblinking then as he drew a slow breath. 'We have to be strong...'

Solomon leant back in his chair, sighting contentedly.

'You seem happy' Daizel replied.

Solomon sat forward suddenly, resting with his arm against the table before him.

'Things are going well' Solomon said, 'but we have to be careful.'

'Do you think we are in danger?' Daizel replied.

‘We are always in danger’ Solomon answered, grabbing a bottle and rising to his feet. He moved across the room, taking a deep swing.

‘You are right that we still have to be careful’ Daizel said. ‘It’s not only the queen we are fighting against, but the right hand, the other side of the council.’

‘We struggle on’ Solomon sighed, gazing out of the window. ‘The fight never ends...but...’ he brought the bottle to his lips, smelling the sweet scent and staring at his own reflection before him. The clouds in the sky outside were thick and heavy, the world was dark. ‘We’ve taken a step forward’ Solomon continued. ‘We have to fight to hold our place.’

‘We’ve taken over some authority within the palace’ Daizel agreed. ‘This place is quite comfortable’ he smiled at their surroundings. ‘I could get used to it.’

‘Well just don’t let your guard down’ Solomon warned. ‘You do that, you die. Remember...’ he swirled the contents of the bottle, lifting his heavy eyes, ‘attack first, or be attacked.’

‘What about the boys?’ Daizel asked.

Solomon pursed his lips. He hummed thoughtfully.

‘They are still young’ he said quietly. ‘We still have time.’

‘Their mother will get in the way’ Daizel said.

Solomon gripped the bottle tighter in his hand. ‘We still have time’ he said again.

The very next morning at the earliest possible opportunity, the boys woke and left the palace, before their mother had a chance to stop them.

They ran to the catacombs, entered the river and resurfacing on the other side. Changing into the dry clothes they had left out on the rocks and running quickly across the beach in their haste to meet her. When they saw Auntie they slowed to a stop, smiles wide upon their faces as they panted heavily from their excursion.

She beamed back at them, her mask held in a hand.

‘Good morning boys.’

They ran to her, embracing her tightly.

For hours they played in the tree house they had finished building the day before. Cam climbing dangerously high in the tree, from below Auntie kept a close eye on him in case he was to fall. Luke on the other hand who was a poor climber, stayed close to the ground where it was safe.

When the boys grew tired they sat down to rest, each sitting either side of Auntie, her arm resting around each of them.

‘Mother wants us to stay in the palace’ Luke was saying. ‘She’s sure to find out soon we’re leaving.’

‘I know’ Auntie replied sombrely.

‘How?’ Cam asked her.

‘I can see it in your faces’ she replied vaguely.

She giggled at them then, snuggling them and squeezing them closer to her.

‘Would you boys like to hear a story?’

‘Yeah’ they both said at once.

‘We love stories’ Cam beamed.

‘Once upon a time’ the beautiful woman began, ‘in a place far away from here, there lived two brothers, like you’ she said to the boys, giving them both a tight hug. ‘Except these brothers weren’t twins. But they were special, because they had magic.’

‘Magic’ Luke repeated. ‘It would be fun to have magic’ he gleamed.

‘It would indeed’ the beautiful woman said nuzzling him. ‘Now these brothers, they had no father, and their mother didn’t care for them. They only had each other.’

‘Like us’ Cam spoke up.

‘That’s right’ the beautiful woman smiled. ‘These brothers had nothing, but each other and their magic. Now they didn’t know it at the time, but there was another magical being that was near them, a powerful being far stronger than either of them, but despite her powers, she was unable to use her magic.’

Luke fidgeted next to Auntie, playing with his shoes as he listened, but never taking his eyes off her face.

‘This magical being’ the Auntie went on, ‘was a being called a philosophers stone, the most powerful magical thing that existed in that world. She was being hunted by two different groups, magical beings like the brothers, but older, wiser and more experienced. One group wanted to save her, the other group wanted to harm her, and use her powers for their own. You see, the only way to use the power of a philosophers stone to their full extent, is to kill them. And so, the philosophers stone, this powerful girl, was forced to flee, always running, never resting...’

‘How can you use the powers of a philosophers stone if they are dead?’ Luke asked her.

‘Because when they die’ Aunt explained, ‘their bodies fade away, leaving behind the piece of them that makes them powerful. A bright pink stone; a thing in which their power resides.’

‘What does reside mean?’ Cam asked her.

‘It means to live in a particular place’ Aunt said, ‘to be present in.’ She breathed a sigh of contentment, hugging them closer to her. She continued with her story.

‘This philosophers stone, her name was Crystal, and she dressed all in white. There was another philosophers stone also; one dressed all in black, her name was Ebony. Now these brothers’ she said, returning to the point, ‘they always felt out of place in their home, in their world. They had abilities, magical powers that few others possessed. They kept them secret always, no one else knew of them, besides very few, and only those who shared powers like theirs. One day’ she went on, ‘one of the brothers was injured. He had to be taken away to be healed, and so the other brother was left on his own for a short time, and that’s when he met *her*.’

‘Her?’ Cam mimicked.

‘The philosophers stone. The one dressed all in black. She was frightened when she saw him for the first time, as she knew she was being hunted and had lived her whole life in hiding, always afraid. But this brother reached out to her, he told her that he would protect her and keep her safe, and so she trusted him. When the injured brother was well again, they accepted her into their home, for the brothers always did things together, always supported each other, and were rarely apart from one another. But soon enough, the black philosophers stone was found, one group wanted to harm her, the other wanted to save her, but both wanted to take her away. But the black stone didn’t want to go, do you know why?’

‘Why?’ Luke and Cam both echoed.

‘Because she had fallen in love with the elder of the two brothers, the one who had first met her, and through her, they were able to speak to the group that wanted to save her. This group told the brothers that they came from another world, and that they wanted to take both philosophers stones back with them where it was safer.’

‘Another world?’ Cam’s eye lit up. ‘Does such a thing exist?’

‘Oh you sweet boy’ Aunt cooed, poking the end of his nose teasingly. ‘You’re so adorable.’ She turned then towards Luke, tickling him and holding him tight as he began to squirm. She ceased, Luke becoming still again. ‘But it was not to be’ Aunt went on, her tone becoming sad. ‘Despite the efforts of the two young brothers, and their young friends who shared powers like theirs, and the group who wished to save the philosophers stones, they could not be saved. Despite all their collective efforts, both philosophers stones were lost, first the white, and then the black. The elder brother, the one that had fallen in love with the black stone had tried to save her, tried to flee, but his efforts were in vain. The group that had wished to harm her, killed her and took the stone. But there was something they didn’t know. Before she died, the black philosophers stone created an illusion. The stone that was taken was a fake, the one the elder brother found later, was the real one, and he had it all to himself. After that, because they had proven themselves, the group that had tried to save the stones, invited the brothers to their home, opening a portal to another world.’

‘Did they do it?’ Cam asked. ‘Did they go to the other world?’

‘Yes’ Aunt beamed down at him. ‘Both brothers stepped into the wall of light, through the portal and onwards to this new world. The elder brother doing so with the philosophers stone, the most powerful magical thing that existed hidden in his pocket, a final gift given to him by Ebony, his lost love. He would use its power to do great and terrible things.’

‘What happened after that?’ Luke asked eagerly. ‘What happened in the new world?’

‘That my sweet boy’ Aunt said caressing him tenderly, ‘is a story for another time.’

‘Do you think we could travel to other worlds?’ Cam asked her. ‘It would be so exciting, and so fun.’

‘You both still have your whole lives ahead of you’ Aunt said kissing him on the forehead. ‘There is so much that you could do, and don’t forget’ she said turning to Luke and giving him a kiss also, ‘I will be watching over you both. Always.’

She let go of them, rising to her feet.

‘You must go home now. Your mother will be wondering where you are.’

‘But we want to stay with you’ Luke complained.

‘And I want to stay with you too’ she said adoringly, ‘but I must leave. There are things I have to do.’

‘Awwww’ Luke whined.

‘Run along now’ Aunt said, ushering them away. ‘Off with you.’

Cam ran to her, jumping up to give her one last hug before they parted, Aunt held him back, kneeling so Luke could hug her too.

‘I love you boys’ she whispered to them. ‘You know that?’

‘We love you too’ Cam said. ‘Don’t we Luke?’

‘Yeah’ he answered. ‘We do.’

Aunt opened her eyes wide at this in surprise. She smiled then, squeezing them one last time.

‘Off with you now’ she said sounding a little choked. ‘Hurry along.’

‘We’ll be back’ Cam told her. ‘We’ll look for you.’

‘I’ll be here for you when you do’ she said to them. ‘Now go.’

‘You’ll tell us the rest of the story next time?’ Cam asked her. ‘Wont you?’

‘Of course. Now go already’ she laughed.

Luke waved back at her as they went, hurrying to run after Cam as they made their way back home towards the palace.

‘Bye children’ Auntie whispered, waving slowly after them.

Cam and Luke returned quickly to the catacombs, diving into the river.

When they emerged, they saw with shock and horror that their mother was waiting for them, standing in the catacombs beside the river, right there as they surfaced.

Her brow twitched in the same way it did when she was trying to suppress her emotions, most of the time she did this only when she was very angry.

‘Do you boys take me for a fool?’ she asked them dangerously.

Cam and Luke didn’t answer; they only cowered, clinging to each other for comfort as they stood in the river.

The next day, they were confined to their rooms all day. The entrance to the catacombs had been sealed on the queen’s orders, and outside the palace upon the cliffs that overlooked the beach, Auntie waited.

‘How can we trust you’ Hester was saying, ‘when you cannot even keep a watch over your own children?’

Miranda gritted her teeth, a vein in her forehead throbbed.

‘How can you even begin to rule over a kingdom?’ Hester finished.

‘Tch.’ Miranda turned her head away, before looking back to reply.

‘Children...’ she began.

‘Children’ Hester finished hastily. ‘Children.’

Miranda knew he was mocking her, long before he turned to smirk at the others around the table.

She bit her tongue, knowing that to open her mouth would only be playing into their game.

How do they even know about that? She thought furiously to herself. *No...I won’t play into their hands...*

‘We’ve got some matters that need to be discussed’ another said lifting some papers. ‘Shall we begin?’

As usual, Miranda listened silently, as the men around her talked.

Back in their room, Cam and Luke had made a long rope out of the bed sheets they had tied together, flinging it to the window after tying one end to the bed.

‘You go first’ Cam said to his brother.

‘I...’ Luke replied hesitantly, leaning out of the window at the drop. ‘It’s so high.’

‘You’ll be fine’ Cam said encouragingly. ‘I’ll be right behind you. Or do you want me to go first?’

‘No’ Luke said hastily, ‘I can do it.’

He clambered awkwardly over the sill, holding the bed sheets as tight as he could. Luke began to climb carefully down. Cam's heart hammered in his chest as he sat on the window sill watching his brother, and staring down into the gardens below them. A short while later he followed after Luke.

It wasn't the drop that worried Cam the most; it wasn't the fear of losing his grasp and falling, but fear for his brother. Luke was not the best climber, he was awkward and clumsy. A sudden wind picked up around them, rocking the bed sheets as the brothers hung onto them.

'Luke!'

Luke's head shot up one last time to Cam above him as the wind picked up again, before his fingers slipped and he fell.

The day was growing late. Auntie was just about to leave when at last the boys arrived.

'Children!'

Cam ran up to her to embrace her, Auntie held him close, kissing his cheek tenderly. She glanced up then towards Luke, her heart stopping in her chest.

Luke's injuries were only minor, but to see him hurt wounded her so deeply.

'Luke' she wailed rushing over to him. 'You poor thing! What happened?'

'We...' Luke began. He had hobbled the whole way here, even on his injured leg that pained him so much with every step. 'We wanted so badly to see you.'

'We had to climb through the window' Cam explained, coming up behind her. 'Mother has blocked the catacombs, we can't come the way we used to.'

Auntie embraced Luke tightly. 'Stupid boy' she scolded, her voice breaking. 'You could have hurt yourself worse than what you have...you could have even been killed!'

'I don't care!' Luke shot back suddenly angry.

Auntie tensed, eyes wide. She leant back away from Luke, her beautiful face so perfect, so flawless, besides the tears running down her cheeks.

'I wanted to see you' Luke whined, crying too. 'I...I love you Auntie...'

Auntie bit her lip so hard that it bled.

'Oh Luke' she whispered, brushing the tears away from his cheeks tenderly. 'Are you so desperate to get away from your lives?'

'We hate it at home' Cam said loudly beside her, grabbing her by the arm as tight as he could. 'We're frightened...'

'Take us away' Luke commanded. 'Take us away from here. *Please!*'

Auntie stared in shock at him, before slowly leaning forward and wrapping her arms around him. Beside her Cam moved closer, holding her too and crying silently into her shoulder.

'I can't' Auntie whispered. 'I cannot take you away from this place. You have a life here... I cannot take you away from that.'

Auntie lifted Luke carefully in her arms, carrying him down the cliffs and to the sea, taking his shirt and trousers off and kneeling in the water to clean the wounds.

'The salt water will sting a bit' she told him in a quiet voice, placing his leg gently into a shallow pool in the rocks, 'but I have to do this, I have to clean....' She drew a deep and steady breath. 'You've got dirt in all your cuts...you'll get an infection.'

Luke whimpered sadly as Auntie, as tenderly as she could, washed the blood away.

‘You could have broken your leg’ Auntie told him. ‘I don’t want you doing that ever again.’

She paused. ‘Can you promise me that? Promise me Luke.’

‘Yes Auntie’ Luke whispered, ‘only...if you promise to take us away from here.’

Auntie hesitated, then her body relaxed slightly, shoulder slumped.

Auntie lifted her eyes to Luke’s, answering at last.

‘Alright’ she mumbled weakly back, before returning her attention back to the pool and continuing to clean away the dirt. ‘If that is what you really want.’

‘We hate it here’ Luke sobbed. ‘Since father died...I don’t care what happens.’ Tears began to run down his cheeks. ‘I just want to get away, somewhere where I feel safe.’

Auntie glanced back at Cam beside her.

‘Is this...what you want too?’

‘Yes’ Cam replied without hesitation. ‘You want us to stay safe. You say that you love us; then don’t leave us here where we’ll only be hurt.’

Auntie looked away then, hanging her head as she grasped Luke leg tenderly.

‘I will take you far away’ she relented, ‘somewhere safe; somewhere where you will be happy.’

She cupped her hands, lifting some of the water and pouring it over Luke’s back.

Luke sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth.

‘It’s cold’ he said.

‘I know.’

‘I stings.’

‘I know...’

‘We don’t want to go home’ Cam told her. ‘We...don’t really belong there anymore.’

Auntie turned to face him.

‘Don’t worry’ Auntie said in a hushed voice. ‘I promise you, that the next time we meet...things will be different.’

‘You’ll take us away?’ Luke asked, voice growing hopeful.

‘Yes’ Auntie whispered. ‘I will...take you to my own home, from there...’ she smiled weakly. ‘You can...’ she broke off, looking at each of the boys in turn. ‘My home is a strange place’ she finished. ‘I don’t know...if I am honest...that you will like it. But it’s alright.’ She smiled widely then. ‘If you don’t like it, we can go somewhere else. There are many places we could go. I’m sure you’d like at least some of them, and I’m sure one of them...you could call your home.’

Auntie walked with the boys back to the palace after it began to grow dark, she carried Luke tenderly in her arms, as Cam tagged along after her, holding a section of her cloak in his hand tightly for comfort.

She entered the gardens of the palace easily, gliding like a spirit through the silent orchards. Cam still had not let go of her cloak, and as they entered through the rusted iron gates, Cam copied Auntie’s footsteps, matching them perfectly.

It was pretty in the garden, the flowers were in full bloom, the hedges that grew around them were well tended and everything was pristine. But the boys knew the garden would be deserted now, the gardeners only worked in the mornings, so there was no one around.

Soon enough, they reached the spot below the window of the boy's bedroom. Auntie put Luke down.

'I'll wait here until you climb up' Auntie told them. 'I'll watch you, and catch you if you fall. Now be careful.'

'I love you Auntie' Luke mumbled, jumping up and grabbing her around the neck, hugging her one last time before she left them.

'I love you too' Auntie said, embracing Luke tightly, before turning to Cam. 'I will see you both soon' she whispered hugging him too. 'Now go.'

Auntie watched as the two boys climbed back up the line of tied bed sheets that still hung there, Cam going first; and following slowly after him was Luke. His injuries still pained him, but somehow, he managed to climb up.

Auntie only slipped away back into the darkness, after she had watched both boys climb back into their bedroom, through the open window and to safety.

'Goodbye' she whispered to the night, turning back one last time towards the palace before setting off, back to her home and away.

The moment Cam and Luke entered their bedroom and straightened, they both tensed in shock.

Their mother had been waiting for them. The very sight of her terrified them; they had never seen her this way before. She was so angry; her eyes had turned bloodshot red.

In a few short strides she was upon them, stepping out of the shadows and grabbing Luke who happened to be closest.

'No!' Cam screamed, grabbing her by the arm. 'Leave him alone.'

Miranda listened, turning her attention onto Cam instead. She slapped him so hard she sent him reeling.

Luke began to tremble violently, backing against the wall as he watched his mother continue to beat and kick Cam. The fear and the horror only made him freeze, he could only watch helplessly as Cam curled into a ball to try to protect himself.

'No...' he whispered, unable to find his voice. 'Please...stop...'

When Miranda finally relented she knelt before Cam, grabbing him by the shoulders and lifting him roughly to his feet. 'Disobey me again and I will kill you myself' she snarled through gritted teeth.

She threw him back to the floor, striding over to the windows and pulling the bed sheets up, tucking them under her arm before snapping the window shut.

She rounded on the boys one last time.

'Do you take this for a joke?! Don't you even care about your own lives?! Do you think this is a game?!'

She marched out of the room without another word or backwards glance, taking the bed sheets with her. She slammed the door behind her, trapping them both inside.

The sound of the key turning in the lock was final.

All was quiet.

Luke stared down at Cam, who was curled up in a ball on the floor, sobbing into his hands.

The fear began to ebb away. Luke pushed himself off the wall, stepping lightly across the floor and moving towards Cam.

He knelt beside him, reaching a hand tentatively out to him.

‘C-Cam...?’ tears prickled in his eyes as he spoke. ‘Cam...I’m sorry.’

Cam pushed himself gingerly up, groaning at the new pains in his body. He turned towards his brother and wrapping his arms around his neck, sobbing into his shoulders.

Luke held him back, crying with him, rocking back and forth.

‘I’m sorry Cam...you sss-stepped forward to help....I’m sorry I didn’t...I couldn’t...I just froze...I’m sorry.’

‘It’s ok’ Cam whispered. ‘I’m glad...to save you.’ He smiled then, new bruises appearing on his face. ‘You’ve already been hurt. And besides...I’m the older twin.’ He paused. ‘It was my duty to save you.’

Luke clutched him tighter, fresh tears streaming from his eyes.

‘No matter what happens’ Luke whispered, ‘I’m glad at least that we have each other.’

A few hours later and the two boys were lying on their own beds, both shivering in the large and chilly room, their small bodies cold without the sheets.

Cam was unable to sleep; Luke on the other hand, was far away.

After several hours of tossing and turning, Cam gave up any more thoughts of sleep, instead rising from his bed and tip-toeing quietly over to Luke.

‘I’m sorry’ Cam whispered to him, leaning over him as he slept. ‘I have to see her one last time. I have to....work something out....’ He balled his fists, trying his best to keep back his tears. Luke did not stir as Cam spoke to him. Cam leant back. ‘I’ll talk to her’ he whispered to his brother. ‘I’ll work something out.’ He smiled weakly. ‘Auntie will know what to do.’

Cam turned from him. He escaped out of the window, just one last time. Being a good climber he was able to make his careful way down the outer wall, using the windowsills to hold onto, using the cracks in the aged rock, the vines that grew up the side of the palace from the garden, anything he could find. Though it was dark, the moon shone brightly over head, and Cam could see his way as he slowly made his descent. It was incredibly dangerous what he did now, one slip and he might not recover from the fall.

He climbed slowly; it was painful for him, suffering these new injuries at the hands of his own mother. She had never beaten him before. Even so, it had not entirely surprised him that she had done such a thing.

He climbed down the wall, each move incredibly careful. It took several minutes, but at last he reached the bottom, letting go of the crack in the rock once he decided the fall was safe. He stumbled on the grass, falling to his knees. He stared down at his hands, fingers cut and nails bleeding. It didn’t matter though. The only thing that mattered was reaching Auntie.

Cam forced himself to stand, grimacing as he did. He tilted his head back, looking up at the window above, sure that his brother was still fast asleep in their room. He always had been a heavy sleeper.

‘I’m sorry Luke’ he whispered to the night before turning on his heel and making his way. ‘I’m sorry to have to leave you like this.’

Cam hurried as quickly as he could through the garden and out through one of the small rusted gates. He ran as fast as he could across the open field and to the beach beyond. He ran

until his sides hurt, he ran until his breath came in wheezes, until his body ached and the muscles in his legs burned. He only slowed when he reached the cliffs, pausing with a hand on a rock, doubled over to catch his breath. He touched the stitch at his side tenderly, grimacing at the bruise that was there.

Mother... he thought. I hate you...

He stayed for a moment to catch his breath, straightening when he felt a little better. He moved slowly onwards across the cliffs, looking for *her*.

The moon lit up the plains around him, and Cam could see clearly everything around him, thought it was still dark.

He began to wander around aimlessly for some time, until he saw something, drawing back suddenly at the sight of not one, but two figures, each identical to the other, each wearing black gloves, hooded black robes, and the same plague masks Cam had become so familiar with. None of their skin was visible, as always with those strange figures.

Cam leant back against the rock breathing slowly, before peering around it again and towards the figures.

One he thought was Auntie; he recognised her voice as she whispered to the other figure, though he couldn't make out what she was saying.

The other figure, he didn't know why, but he felt was that same figure as the one he and his brother had seen when they had met Auntie for the very first time. He wasn't speaking, but he had a tall and muscular build, like a man's. There was something about his demeanour that seemed a little off, a little tense, a little irritant. His body language...

Cam narrowed his eyes as he tried to read it.

There was something very wrong about his aura.

Auntie lifted her hand then, taking her mask off. Cam saw her face as she did so, but she did not see him. With the distance between them, Cam clinging close to the rock in the dark and utterly still, and her attention fixed on the other hooded figure before her, she hadn't noticed Cam.

Auntie held her mask with one hand, reaching towards the other figure and taking his mask off too. She was smiling.

Cam crouched slightly, completely absorbed on the scene before him.

The two seemed to lean towards each other for a kiss. Cam watched without reaction.

The male figure, with his back to Cam took his mask back from Auntie, pulling her body closer to his with the hand that still held the mask, caressing her with his other hand as he pulled her into another deep and prolonged kiss.

Cam watched this curiously. He had never seen his own parents behave this way towards each other, before when his father was alive. He has seen young couples kiss on one or two occasions in those rare moments in the past when he and Luke had snuck into the city outside their home. He had wondered briefly why people did this and what it meant.

Cam couldn't tear his eyes away as he watched. The male figure suddenly pulled Auntie towards him again, jerking her, even though she was already close, their bodies pressed together.

Neither moved for a few seconds, then Auntie tilted her head back, a look of what could only be described as shock was written over her face.

'My love...' Cam heard her whisper, '...why...?'

‘Dead man’s boots’ the male figure spoke clearly now, his voice unnaturally calm. ‘I have a friend you see.’

Cam didn’t understand what he meant by that, he didn’t understand what had happened.

Until Auntie stepped back.

Cam gasped with shock, eyes growing wide as he saw a knife protruding from her gut.

Auntie fell to her knees and collapsed. The other figure bent forwards, pulling the knife out of her sharply.

Cam clapped his hands over his mouth to stop himself from crying out, heart racing; body beginning to sweat and tremble. He watched helplessly as the other figure knelt beside Auntie’s body, running the blade across her throat to ensure that she was dead.

The slice was deep and the blood ran quickly, staining the grass as it seeped out of the artery.

Cam’s eyes travelled down to the grass around her body.

Blood.

There was so much blood.

‘Gods...’ he whispered, stepping back.

The male hooded figure rose to his feet again, standing with his back to Cam. He replaced the mask back where it was, covering his face once more.

And then he turned fully around, suddenly staring at Cam head on.

Cam’s heart froze in his chest.

He had been seen.

The vision of that hooded man standing before him with bloodied knife in hand, became imprinted in his memory forever.

Cam blinked several times, as the figure glided towards him in a horrifying manner, as if not human, but a spectre.

Cam turn-tailed and ran for his life.

Everything was a blur after that. Cam ran away as fast as he could, running towards the fields where the grass grew long, where the trees grew tall, somewhere he could hide.

But he didn’t get very far, when suddenly the tall cloaked figure appeared right before him, flicking into existence from nothing.

Cam skidded to a stop; he was instantly grabbed by his wrist by the male masked figure.

Cam cried out in fear, trying to pull away from him. The stranger whipped out the knife and drew it to Cam’s throat. Cam froze, staring up in terror at his own reflection in those blank eyes in that mask, the figure that towered over him.

He trembled, whimpering and gritting his teeth as tears ran down his cheeks.

The masked figure leant further over him slowly, still holding the knife to Cam’s throat.

Their faces were inches apart now; Cam tried to pull away again, glancing briefly down at his wrist that was beginning to hurt in the stranger’s grip, before looking back up at those terrible eyes.

The stranger moved closer still, until the beak of the mask was nearly touching his skin. Then the stranger stopped, as if hesitating.

Cam waited for what the stranger would do next. Perhaps he would slash his throat and end his life forever, as he had done to Auntie.

Cam was sure at that moment that he was going to die.

But then the figure suddenly spoke, a single word that cut through Cam's trance.

'Run.'

He let him go and Cam fell back.

The figure tucked the knife away, straightening up and turning. He glided away like a spirit, it looked like his legs weren't even moving, which scared Cam even more.

Before he had slipped out of sight, Cam rose to his feet again, running the opposite direction.

He ran until his muscles burned, until it felt like his lungs were on fire and his breath came in rasps, until the stitch in his side became unbearable, the pains in his body agonising.

He collapsed suddenly in the grass, hunched over resting on his knees and leaning forwards, holding his body with his forehead pressed against the ground.

Gasping and wheezing, his clothes soaked in sweat as he trembled.

Cam sat back on his heels, holding his aching sides, tears streaming down his face.

He forced himself to rise again, hugging his belly he moved one step at a time, hunched over and trudging onwards through the night. He didn't know where he was going, he simply walked through the tall grass and the forests, until the vegetation around him became sparse, until it vanished altogether. He kept walking still, until his feet met with stone.

Cam paused glancing up. There were houses around him. He had come to the edge of the city that surrounded his palace home. The buildings on the edges were smaller and built further apart with wider roads, deeper in the city towards the centre, the buildings were crammed in and the roads more congested.

Cam leant against the wall of one of the houses, holding his side and resting with his head against the stone. The stitch still pained him, his damp clothes stuck to him as he moved.

Cam let out a heavy sigh, forcing himself to stand straight.

Cam walked on, moving slowly with his head hung. He moved through the dark city streets, quickly becoming lost in its maze.

He wandered without rest long into the night. At one point a man grabbed him, a hand darting out from the shadows and spinning him around to face him.

Cam stared up with wide eyes, but his demeanour hadn't changed. He showed no fear. Not this time, still suffering from the shock of what he had witnessed before.

'What's a young boy like you doing wandering the streets alone?' the man asked.

Cam tilted his head back. He saw beneath the man's hood that he was old and very skinny, with worn skin and missing teeth.

'Anything could happen to you' the man gleamed leering down at him. 'Think of all the things...' he trailed off; a strange look crossed his face.

Cam did not break his gaze from the vagrant's face. It felt for a moment that the man was caressing his shoulder, but then Cam realised, that he was in fact feeling the fabric of his shirt.

'How did...where did you get this?' the stranger asked, a worried tone creeping into his voice. 'Only a lord could afford such wealth.'

And then the stranger's hand went around Cam's neck. He picked the necklace Cam wore, feeling it between his fingers. It was silver and studded with jewels.

'Oh my...' the vagrant said with hungry eyes. 'Only the young princes would wear such finery, and your clothes....' He broke off.

With lightning quick moves the stranger's hand slipped around the back of Cam's neck, unclasping the necklace with swift fingers. The stranger vanished into the night, drifting backwards and out of sight before Cam knew what had happened.

He was alone again.

He stayed in the streets that night. The sun rose hours later to find the young prince hanging around the outside of a shop, sitting on a step with his head in his hands, staring at the ground between his legs.

It was hours later after that, when they came for him.

Cam was so deep in his trance, that he did not notice them until one of them grasped his shoulder and shook him lightly. Then he heard his name being spoken.

Cam lifted his head, eyes bloodshot red; he stared blearily up into the face of the soldier, one of the palace guards.

Cam thought vaguely that his mother must have sent them to go look for him.

'Young prince' the guard spoke again. 'Thank the gods we've found you safe. You must come with us now.'

When Cam didn't move, the soldier leant forwards, taking him gently by the hand and pulling him to his feet.

'Come on' the guard spoke softly. 'You're safe with us now. We'll take you home.'

The moment his mother walked into the room she slapped him.

'What happened?' she demanded of Cam shaking him. 'Where did you go?!'

Cam didn't look at her, instead stared at the ground at his feet, his black hair hanging over his face, his cheek burning painfully.

'Cam!'

He looked up.

Miranda hesitated, seeing his bloodshot eyes. But there was something else that made her falter, something in his expression.

It was grief.

'What happened?' Miranda asked softly now, holding him either side of his face.

When he didn't answer, she simply embraced him, holding him in her arms silently.

Cam would later work out as the memory ran in a loop in his mind, that as the cloaked figures had kissed, the male figure slowly drew a knife from beneath his cloak, stabbing Auntie in the belly.

He had used the kiss as a distraction to disguise his true intentions.

She trusted him, Cam would realise with increased horror. *She trusted him and he killed her.*

'Who can you trust in this world?' Cam murmured.

'What was that?' Luke asked loudly. 'Cam? Did you say something?'

'No' Cam quickly replied.

They were in their bedroom now. Both boys had been confined, and the window had been bolted shut. The only draft in the room came now from the fireplace, which was cold and lifeless.

‘Luke...’ Cam began reluctantly. ‘Auntie.....well.....she’s gone.....’

Luke stared back wide-eyed at his brother. He reached forward with a tentative hand to touch his arm.

Cam turned to him and embraced him, sobbing into his shoulder.

Interlude start

Reuben picked up a black card and turned it over, reading it out loud.

‘What brought the orgy to a grinding halt?’

Beside him Tiara slapped herself in the face. ‘I cannot believe you convinced me to play this game.’

Lucas smirked silently, staring at the five white cards he held in his hand. ‘What brought the orgy to a grinding halt?’ he repeated, picking one of the white cards and placing it on the table. ‘Ass to mouth’ he said.

‘The safe word’ Reuben said putting his own card down.

Tiara glanced at the brothers, eyebrow raised. She pondered for a moment, before placing her own white card down. ‘A bunch of idiot playing a card game instead of interacting like normal humans.’

Reuben threw his head back in laughter.

‘I think you win that one’ Lucas sniggered beside him. ‘You pick up the next card.’

Tiara picked up a black card and read it out loud.

‘Blank will never be the same after blank.’

‘A 55-gallon drum of lube’ Lucas began picking two white cards from his hand, ‘will never be the same after...all of this blood.’

Reuben cackled hilariously at this, Tiara only gasped and stared in shock.

‘Getting abducted by Peter Pan’ Reuben read aloud picking two white cards to complete the sentence, ‘will never be the same after double penetration.’

‘Santa Claus will never be the same after scrotum tickling’ Tiara read aloud placing her own white cards down.

‘Tiara I’m surprised at you’ Lucas laughed aloud.

His brother sighed beside him, tears of laughter running down his face as he practically cried into a hand. ‘Oh...’ he sighed again. ‘I’ve had too much to drink.’

‘It’s my turn to pick a card’ Lucas said taking a black one from the pile.

‘When all else fails, I can always masturbate to...’

They all put their cards down at once.

‘...wearing an octopus for a hat.’

‘...my worthless son.’

‘...Stockholm Syndrome.’

They all dissolved into fits of laughter (even Tiara).

‘It’s your turn Reuben’ Lucas gasped, holding his aching sides as he laughed too hard.

Tiara picked up another white card as Reuben picked up a black card to start the sentence. On the table around the cards were several bottles, beside a pair of black gloves and a plague mask, staring up at the ceiling with its blank round glass eyes.

Reuben placed the black card on the table.

‘What's the gift that keeps on giving?’

Interlude end

That night, Cam woke up screaming.

He had had dreams, horrible nightmares of a knife at his throat. A hooded and masked figure standing over him, the vision of the bloodied knife in the strangers hand had burned into his memory and worse, the sight of Auntie collapse; the sight of all that blood.

Luke having been woken abruptly by Cam’s terror had run from the room to get their mother, leaving Cam all alone after his efforts to calm him had failed.

Cam lay in his bed sweating and shaking, heart hammering in his chest as the nightmare clung to his mind.

But the memory of that horror soon faded, only to be replaced with something far worse.

Brioke.

Cam glanced up and saw him there. The council member, standing at the bottom of his bed at the very precise moment he had been left alone.

Cam glanced about him, but his brother wasn’t there.

He stared back up at that figure, tall and imposing. Brioke stared down at him; there was something in his eyes that Cam did not like; something strong. Had Cam been a bit older, he would perhaps have recognised it.

It was lust.

But Brioke was long gone by the time Luke returned with their mother. Cam was shocked to see how upset Luke was, his voice wavered as he spoke and there were tears in his eyes.

‘Cam?’ Miranda spoke calmly to him. ‘Are you alright?’

Cam stared up at his mother, shaking his head slowly.

‘Did you have a nightmare?’ she asked him levelly.

He nodded.

‘Drink this’ she said to him, lifting the glass in her hand that she had brought with her. ‘It will help you sleep. It will stop the nightmares.’

She held the glass to his lips, tilting his head back as he drank deeply.

Seconds later, Cam had slumped back against his bed, fast asleep and utterly still.

‘Will he be alright now?’ Luke asked uncertainly.

‘Yes’ Miranda whispered to him. ‘Now go to bed yourself. It’s very late.’

Luke lay back in his own bed after the queen had gone, resting on his side and facing Cam. He watched Cam for hours with concern, too frightened by his scream; he couldn’t even think about sleep.

He only slipped into an uneasy rest as the sun began to rise, and later on that morning, Cam woke, moving over to Luke and shaking him awake.

‘Luke’ he whispered. ‘Luke.’

Luke groaned, sitting up and rubbing his tired eyes to see Cam kneeling in the bed beside him.

‘Are you alright?’ Luke mumbled, lowering his hands and turning to face his brother.

‘I’m fine’ Cam replied.

‘Last night’ Luke began, ‘what...I mean...why?’

‘It doesn’t matter’ Cam answered quickly. ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

Cam couldn’t get out of his mind, that figure that had appeared in his room the night before. He recognised him as one of the council members, but couldn’t remember his name.

He couldn’t forget about the man standing at the foot of his bed. No matter how hard he tried.

‘I want to...’ Cam began in a trembling voice. ‘I want to go outside...to play.’

‘Alright’ Luke nodded meekly. ‘I’ll come.’

The boys got dressed quickly and ran down the many stairs in their palace home, slipping through one of the smaller servant doors on the ground floor and escaping outside through a narrow passage. What they found here in the garden surprised both of them.

‘What’s going on here?’ Luke demanded of the soldier.

‘The gates of the palace grounds are being shut permanently for your own safety’ the guard replied. ‘On the orders of the queen.’

‘So no one can come in?’ Cam asked tentatively. ‘Ever?’

‘The only way in or out now’ the soldier replied, ‘is by the front gates, which will be heavily guarded from now on. Sorry princes, this is for your own good.’ He moved away silently, making his way back across the garden.

Cam and Luke exchanged a fearful glance, before looking back at the small garden gate before them, or at least, what had become of it.

The gate had been entirely bricked up now, and the wall that stood before them matched the walls that surrounded the rest of the garden. Impossibly high and built of smooth stone.

There was no way for them to climb over.

‘It’s ok’ Luke whispered to his brother as Cam moved closer to him for comfort. ‘We can still have fun inside the palace grounds.’

Chapter Six

‘Strange’ Astley said, peering through the window to the outside world.

‘What’s strange?’ Dax replied glancing up.

Astley released the velvet curtain, turning back to the room.

‘Closing the gates to keep the princes in.’ He frowned. ‘It’s a strange thing to do.’

‘Is it so strange? They are her sons after all, why wouldn’t she want to keep them safe?’ Dax leant back in his chair, swirling the wine in his glass around and around.

‘How amusing’ Astley said dryly.

‘She has the power to do that’ Dax added, ‘what little power she has now. And the boys do seem to like to wander off don’t they?’

Astley smirked, turning back to the window again. ‘Yes’ he said as he watched the bored looking guards standing by the great gates like statues. ‘We have to keep an eye on them now...for their own safety.’ His expression grew serious then. ‘Are you sure she will not cause us too many problems?’

‘Of course I’m not sure’ Dax replied, ‘but...’ he glanced towards the window Astley stood beside. ‘I wonder what happened to make the queen do this. What is she trying to achieve?’

‘It doesn’t matter’ Astley droned. ‘If anything...it makes things all the more easy for us.’ he brought a hand to his mouth then, brow furrowed as he thought. He spoke now, almost as if to himself. ‘If the boys cannot leave, then they will remain in the palace, where it will be easier to get to them. Miranda...if you are trying to protect them...then you are going the wrong way about it. You should have taken them away, far away...and yourself along with them.’

Cam was lethargic that day; he seemed distant, distracted, and unable to concentrate. Luke tried to engage him in something fun, tried to cheer him up and take his mind off whatever was troubling him. He decided to make a kite out of brightly coloured material, tying it all together with ribbons and bits of string. The brothers went outside that morning to play, Luke taking the kite with them and flying it through the air. But in his mind Cam was far removed from the rest of the world, was far removed from his brother.

At one point, Cam was vaguely aware of his brother saying something, but he wasn’t sure exactly what. Luke’s voice seemed distant and faded as if he were speaking underwater. Cam watched the string from the kite trail past him along the ground, the kite threatening to take off, becoming lost forever in the sky.

‘Cam!’ Luke called again running up to him, speaking louder now, grabbing him by the shoulder and shaking him. ‘The kite!’

Cam lifted his head, blinking to clear his thoughts as Luke ran on and after the kite as it floated away through the air, threatening to go higher and higher and out of reach.

‘Aww dammit’ Luke huffed, slowing to a stop a distance away and staring up at the kite now caught in a tree. ‘It’s not coming down now.’ He turned back to Cam who had jogged after him to catch up. ‘What’s gotten into you?’ he asked him. ‘You’re not yourself today.’

‘I’m...sorry...’ Cam mumbled. ‘I...didn’t mean to...’

‘It doesn’t matter’ Luke waved away. ‘I’ll have to climb it. Stay here and watch me.’

Luke approached the tree. Cam tilted his head back as Luke began to climb laboriously up the branches. The drop was precarious, and as Luke climbed higher and higher, Cam began to grow worried.

Agonising minutes passed.

Above him Luke scrambled onto another branch, clawing his way closer to the kite still stuck firmly in the tree, its tail waving at him in the wind.

Luke reached forward, hand outstretched. Cam’s eyes widened as he watched. The kite was nearly in Luke’s reach, when he slipped.

Cam's heart stopped inside his chest as he watched his brother plummet, hitting several branches and falling into a bush at the base of the tree.

'Luke!' he cried in panic, running over to him. 'Oh gods...' Cam fumbled, fighting through the thick foliage and falling to his knees beside Luke, hands hovering over his brother's leg uncertainly. 'Are you ok?'

'I think I heard a crack' Luke uttered, trying to sit up. 'Cam...I think it's broken.'

There was already swelling and bruising around the leg. Cam clapped his hands over his mouth, trying to stop himself from being sick.

'Cam!' Luke called again, only managing to break Cam from his trance by shaking him. 'I can't stand. Run and get a healer. Now!'

Cam rose to his feet too fast, quickly becoming dizzy, his vision clouding over. Cam felt for the wall of the palace beside him as he went, using it for support.

Immediately as he rounded the corner he sunk to his knees, being violently sick and waiting for his sight to clear again. Only after several seconds passed did he muster the will to stand, this time doing so slowly.

He made his way gingerly forwards, picking up speed as he went, heading to the main doors of the palace, all the while thinking of his poor injured brother he had left behind, waiting for him to return.

I have to be quick Cam thought to himself. *He's waiting for me.*

For ages he ran around the palace, calling desperately for help, searching for someone, *anyone*. But there was no one around.

'Where are the palace guards?' Cam whimpered, clenching his teeth and fighting back tears. 'Where are they? They're supposed to always be here.' *Why now...?*

Eventually in his desperation he collapsed where he stood, crying hysterically into his hands, thinking of his brother outside still waiting for help. Minutes later, by pure chance a figure appeared. It was the governess.

'Cam?' Sylvia asked worriedly. 'Whatever's the matter? Where is your brother?'

'He's hurt' Cam sobbed, wiping his teary eyes as he raised his head up at her. 'He's hurt himself. Please help him. He's hurt his leg.'

'Where is he?' Sylvia asked hastily as Cam rose gingerly to his feet.

'Outside...by the big tree growing by the palace wall.'

Sylvia strode briskly away with Cam hurrying behind to keep up with her; he followed the governess back outside, back to his brother who was waiting patiently.

'Oh gods' the governess exclaimed at the sight of his leg. 'Luke did you climb this tree?'

'The kite' Luke argued back. 'It was stuck.'

'Stupid boy' she scolded, bending down to pick him up, ignoring his cries of protest as his leg hurt him. 'Be still' she told him, more soothing now. 'You'll be fine.'

She carried him back to the palace; he looked so small in her arms. She carried him with ease, heading to the healing rooms on the lower grounds.

'Stop following me' she shot back at Cam.

'But I...'

'You'll get in the way' she snapped. 'Just wait in your room. Your brother will be fine.'

'Don't worry!' Luke waved to him from around her body as Cam slowed to a stop. 'I'll be fine I promise. I'll find you lateerrrr!' he called, disappearing around the corner.

Cam stared at the corner he had vanished behind, feeling suddenly lost and alone. He had rarely been apart from his brother, and without him by his side, he didn't know what to do. *How could I have been so stupid? This is all my fault. If I hadn't been distracted...if I hadn't let him climb that tree...* Cam balled his fists. *He always was a bit clumsy.....I should have gotten the kite myself, then Luke would not have...*

He decided after a time to take the governess' advice and went to his room, walking slowly higher up in the palace, traversing the many many stairs in his home; he at last reached the doors to the bedroom he shared with his brother. But not before he was spotted by a figure that began to trail him.

Cam entered his room, closing the door behind him.

He stared into the room. It was so quiet, so still.

Cam slowly walked forwards, he had never realised until now how large the room they shared was, and how empty it suddenly felt.

He padded forwards and towards his bed, heading towards the toy chest at the foot of the bed. Upon the chest, resting against the closed lid was a small wooden bird with outstretched wings. One of the many toys he and his brother shared. Cam lifted it, moving it slowly through the air as if it were flying. It was a simple toy, it wasn't even painted. Cam at that moment began to think about painting it himself, when the door opened suddenly behind him. Cam glanced nervously around, lowering the toy in his hand. He recognised the figure that stood there, though he didn't know the person well.

'You're that man on the council' Cam said. 'I've seen you before.'

Brioke closed the door behind him slowly, approaching Cam even more slowly, and never taking his eyes off him. Cam began to feel suddenly uneasy, and even a little frightened under the man's piercing stare.

'What do you want?' Cam asked him, voice shaking slightly. 'Why are you here?'

Brioke just stood there, staring silently down at him. For the longest time he did nothing.

And then he knelt, pulling Cam towards him in a firm embrace.

The toy bird slipped from Cam's fingers as Brioke held him. He stared wide eyed at the ceiling above, unable to move in Brioke's grasp.

Luke was given drugs to ease the pain. His leg had swollen, and the healers said it was indeed broken, though the injury was not severe and they suspected the bone to be only cracked. His leg was put in a splint, and a short time later Luke was sent on his way.

Immediately after he was allowed to go and still feeling a little giddy from the painkillers, he went to find his brother. Deciding to look for him first in their bedroom, he made his way awkwardly through the palace and up the many stairs. The splint around his leg was making his journey longer and more tedious than it should have been, especially on the stairs. But at last he reached the top of the last set of stairs, and hobbled down the corridor as fast as he could, stumbling before the bedroom door and grabbing the handle to support him.

He righted himself and opened the door, hopping in merrily.

'Cam!' he beamed at the sight of him. 'I found you! Good.'

He closed the door behind him and shuffled forwards, sitting on the toy chest at the foot of Cam's bed, sitting beside him.

Cam hadn't seemed to even have noticed he was there. He hadn't looked up or made any reaction whatsoever.

'Hey' Luke said, grabbing him by the shoulder and shaking him lightly. 'Cam?'

Cam turned his head to him. He was extremely pale, his eyes wide like dinner plates.

'What's wrong?' Luke asked, becoming worried now. He tilted his head, waiting for a response. 'Cam?'

Cam didn't answer, but continued to stare.

'Did I do something wrong?' Luke asked tentatively. 'If I did then I'm sorry.'

Cam still didn't answer.

'Is it because I got hurt? Because I tried to climb the tree? Cam, please say something.'

Luke tried to engage him, but after his failed attempts to get him to speak, Luke ran (as best he could) to find their mother, who showed little interest.

'He's probably just upset you hurt yourself' Miranda answered without looking up as she shuffled through some papers. 'Just leave him be and I'm sure he'll be fine.'

Luke returned to their room. That evening, Cam went to bed in silence, lying facing the wall with his back to Luke. Luke stared at his brother fixated, until eventually a long while later he succumbed to sleep. But his worry would not let him rest peacefully, and he woke early the next morning before the sun had risen.

Unable to get comfortable where he lay, he threw his sheets back, tip-toeing silently across the room to Cam's bed. He crawled upon the bed, leaning over Cam to see his face.

He was surprised to see Cam was wide awake, still with the same vacant expression as before.

Luke placed a hand upon his shoulder, squeezing him for a moment, a feeble attempt to comfort him, and let him know that he was there.

He didn't go back to his own bed; instead lay down beside Cam, holding him from behind with an arm wrapped around him.

An hour or so later, he had drifted off to sleep again. When he woke that morning after the sun had risen and was fully visible in the sky, Cam was his usual self.

He acted as if nothing had happened.

Every time Luke tried to bring up the subject, Cam would act as if he hadn't heard, or try his best to change topics. Eventually Luke gave up asking, and things continued normally for the rest of that day.

That evening they played together, running around the room with real soldier's helmets upon their heads. Far too big for them, the helmets came down over their eyes. They each had their own little wooden swords and shields that they used to fight each other. They sparred, jumping back and forth as they swung at each other, in their heads they were the mightiest of warriors, the same as the heroes they read about in their story books.

'Do you think princes could fight?' Luke asked Cam, stumbling backwards awkwardly on his splinted leg, waving his arms to keep balance and leaving himself open for attack.

He straightened, smiling at his brother.

'What do you mean?' Cam asked, relaxing slightly and lifting his helmet to see Luke better.

'Do you think we would be allowed to fight in real battles like other soldiers do?'

'I've never really thought about that before' Cam mused.

‘Did father used to fight in battles?’ Luke asked.

‘I don’t know...I don’t think so.’

‘I think we should be able to fight in battles if we want. It would be good for us I think; we could lead our own army and set an example.’

‘When I’m king’ Cam said, ‘I can do whatever I want.’

‘Oh yeah’ Luke said beaming. ‘You’re going to be king before me.’

‘Does that make you jealous?’ Cam asked his brother.

Luke twirled the wooden sword, resting it upon his shoulder.

‘No’ he said. ‘I could never be jealous of you. We’ll always look after each other. There’s no need for jealousy.’

‘You’re right’ Cam said. ‘When I’m king, you can ask me for whatever you want. If it’s in my power, I’ll let you have it. I promise.’

‘I know you will’ Luke said lifting his shield again.

Cam lunged forward, hitting Luke’s shield with all the strength he could muster, Luke struggling to hold his ground with his weakened leg.

On another floor, several flights of stairs above them, the queen was sitting in her room with her handmaiden, sharing a meal.

‘I like these ones’ Clara was saying, picking up one of the pieces of food and examining it before putting it in her mouth and chewing slowly.

Miranda glanced up at her, smiling slowly. ‘You like the sweet ones don’t you’ she said to her.

‘I’ve always had a sweet tooth’ Clara said, ‘ever since I was a child.’

They continued to eat in silence for a few minutes.

‘I like these moments’ Clara said quietly, listening to the crackle of the fire in the hearth nearby.

‘Tell me’ Miranda spoke up, ‘do you enjoy being my servant?’

‘Why such a strange question?’

‘Many strange thoughts pass through my mind day by day’ Miranda sighed. ‘I think of all sorts of things, mostly what things would be like if I lived a different life.’

Clara bowed her head.

‘I do enjoy serving you my lady’ she answered. ‘You are kind to me, and I have a good life.’

Miranda sighed heavily at that, leaning forwards with her elbows on the small table.

‘Do you really mean that?’ the queen asked, ‘or are you just telling me what you think I want to hear?’

‘No, I really do mean it’ Clara said hastily.

She bowed her head as Miranda continued to watch her.

‘Do you think the boys are alright?’ Clara asked.

‘Luke is fine’ Miranda said casually. ‘His leg was only cracked. I’m sure he’s playing with his brother now.’

‘You should probably check on them’ Clara suggested. ‘Just to make sure they’re ok.’

‘Why?’

Clara hesitated, unsure of how to answer.

‘Or I can check on them for you’ Clara said at last, ‘I mean....I don’t want to cause trouble for you.’

Miranda groaned, rubbing her hands over her face tiredly.

‘You’re probably right’ she huffed. ‘I’d better go’ she added as Clara made to move, ‘I am supposed to be their mother.’

‘Best to get it out of the way’ Clara politely prompted, sitting back down.

Miranda rose, pushing her chair noisily back. As she made her way to the door, she grabbed her long gloves and wig, putting them on before she left the room. With these simple accessories she became instantly beautiful. The gloves hid the scars on her arms, and the blonde wig hid her black hair she had cut short herself.

She was ugly without them.

She snapped the door shut behind her, leaving her handmaiden alone to wait patiently for her return.

When she reached the prince’s room, she found a scene of serenity. Both boys were resting in a sitting position on the floor at the foot of one of the beds, both fast asleep, both still wearing their oversized helmets. Their toy wooden swords and shields lay by their sides.

Miranda despite herself, smiled.

She approached her sons, waking them gently by shaking each of their shoulders.

Luke and Cam groaned, lifting their heads simultaneously.

‘Come on’ Miranda whispered, pulling each of their helmets off. ‘It’s late. Its time you went to bed.’

She lifted Cam in her arms, carrying him to his bed and laying him down gently, before doing the same with Luke, laying him in his bed and tucking him in.

‘How does your leg feel?’ Miranda asked Luke.

‘Better’ Luke told her quietly.

‘Goodnight’ Miranda whispered to him, straightening and leaving the room swiftly.

She returned to her own room, feeling exhausted.

‘Goodnight Clara’ she mumbled to her handmaiden, pulling off her wig and gloves off and falling onto her bed without even bothering to undress.

Clara had already cleared away the food from the table, and the rest of the room had been tidied.

‘Goodnight your majesty’ her handmaiden bowed, moving to her own room that was connected to the queens, it was smaller but warmer and cosier.

Silence followed in their wake, broken only by the crackle of the fire, until that too an hour or so later, died out.

Elsewhere in the palace, Saidear was walking down the corridors, heading to his own room. Each member of the council now lived in the palace. They had their own homes of course, located elsewhere; some of the council members had several. But for now, in this most trying time they all gathered at the palace, in the one place where they could each better themselves, and make the most of the opportunities presented to them.

Like vulture’s picking at a carcass Saidear thought to himself, as he strolled down the corridor alone. *I wonder where all this will end.*

He slowed to a stop before his room, staring down at the door handle.

What am I thinking? It will never end. People will always be clawing at each other for power. People will always be at each other's throats. Some men are never happy.

He entered his room, closing the door behind him.

It was dark inside, Saidear moved to light one of the lamps. But before he reached it, a shadow bolted towards him through the dark. Saidear stepped back, drawing a breath to cry out, but the blade pierced his throat before he could do so, silencing him forever.

No evidence was left of what happened, and the killer was long gone before anyone knew.

No one ever saw Saidear again. It was like he simply vanished.

It was many days later, when the young princes were sitting listlessly in their room, bored out of their minds; there came a sudden bang at the window. The loud noise so abruptly breaking the silence caused Luke and Cam to almost jump out of their skin.

'What was that?' Luke worried, glancing fearfully towards his brother.

Cam closed the story book he had been reading, moving tentatively over to the window. He opened the window, leaning out over the edge and gazing downwards at the drop. On the balcony below him on the next level down, he saw a dark shape.

'I think it's a bird' Cam said, narrowing his eyes and craning forwards, trying to get a better look.

'The poor thing' Luke sighed, grabbing onto the edge of the bed and rising awkwardly to his feet, his leg sticking ridiculously out, still bound in a splint. 'Stupid thing' Luke scowled down at it, as if it were his leg's fault that he struggled to get about these days. He had for the most part stayed in his room because of this; even his meals had been brought to their room now. Cam of course had stayed with him.

'Hey' Cam said, still leaning out of the window. 'It's still alive.'

'It is?'

'I'll go get it' Cam said hurriedly, closing the window and moving away from the sill. 'I'll bring it back.'

'Hey wait!' Luke called after him.

'I'll just be a moment' Cam grinned at him, pausing at the door and glancing back at his brother. 'I promise I'll be back. Just wait here for me...kay?'

'M'kay' Luke mumbled miserably at him.

He sat on the bed as Cam snapped the door shut, listening to the endless silence that followed.

He glanced down at himself, glaring resentfully at the split.

'Stupid leg' he grumbled.

Cam hurried as fast as he could; running down the stairs so fast he nearly fell.

When he came to the balcony immediately below his and Luke's bedroom, he found the creature. It was a magpie.

Cam leant tentatively over it, assessing the situation. It seemed dazed, but was indeed alive. It sat there holding one of its wings out instead of tucking it up to its body like birds normally did.

'Perhaps it's broken' Cam said, leaning forwards to pick it up.

He cradled it and lifted the bird in his hands, as he did to the magpie began to squawk as if its wing hurt it.

‘I’m sorry’ Cam said to the bird. ‘I’ll try to be as gentle as possible’ he told it as he held it to his body tenderly.

A sudden thought struck him then.

Mother will know what to do he realised, turning away from the balcony. *I’ll take it to her.*

The bird had fallen silent as Cam walked with it, holding it now away from his body, his arms stuck out before him. He walked slowly, allowing the bird to rest on his open palms.

He dared not touch it more than he had to, too scared he might hurt it, as if were made of sand, that might break and blow away in the slightest breeze.

It took him a long while to walk the many flights of steps up to his mother’s room, where he found her brushing the hair of her wig as it sat on a display pedestal. She lifted her head, seeing Cam’s reflection in the mirror before her. She turned to face him in her chair.

‘What do you want?’ she said shortly.

‘Um...’ Cam fumbled.

He padded over to her.

‘I...I found this bird’ he began. ‘Luke and I were sitting in our room when we heard a bang. It flew into the window.’

He bowed his head to the bird that now sat silently in his open hands.

‘I think it’s broken its wing’ Cam went on as Miranda gently took the bird from him, holding it in both her hands. ‘It’s holding its wing out funny’ Cam said as Miranda’s hands closed around the bird, ‘it’s a bit dazed too’ Cam continued, ‘it must have hit the window pretty hard, I think that if...’ he stopped speaking instantly as he heard a crack.

Miranda relaxed her grip, handing the bird back and placing it in Cam’s open hands.

Cam stared down in shock at the bird, its neck now broken.

Cam closed his mouth, eyed wide in disbelief. He let out a small whimper as tears began to shimmer in his eyes.

‘Do you know what the lesson is here?’ Miranda said patiently, as Cam’s eyes flickered back up to her.

When Cam didn’t speak, Miranda continued.

‘The weak die’ Miranda told him shortly. ‘Life is hard, and if you are not strong, then *you* will suffer too.’ She raised an eyebrow. ‘Only the strong make it in this world.’ She grimaced then, as if the sight of him suddenly annoyed her then. ‘Nothing lives forever’ she said to him, ‘and in the end, everything dies. I did the bird a favour. It was suffering, couldn’t you see?’

She turned her back to him, and continued to tend to her wig.

‘Go away’ she said curtly when Cam hadn’t moved. ‘I’m busy.’

Cam left the room quietly.

Interlude start

The figure watched the dead bird that the young prince held on the monitor, the creature now utterly still.

‘Hm’ he said, before lifting his cup of coffee to his lips and drinking, his attention now drifting to one of the other monitors, where something far more interesting was happening.

Interlude end

Cam buried the creature in the garden, fighting back tears.

I mustn't cry...I have to be strong...

On his way back to his room, Cam met the one person in the world he didn't want to run into. It was Brioke, the right hand of the king.

He was tall and intimidating, staring silently down at him. Cam cowered under his gaze. He unconsciously took a step back, palms beginning to sweat and his breath in shallow rasps.

Brioke continued to stare.

‘I want to see you in my office’ Brioke spoke at last.

Cam shook his head wordlessly, backing himself against the wall.

‘You don't have a choice’ Brioke said. ‘You *have* to come with me. Now.’

Cam froze. He couldn't move, even if he wanted to. His lower lip began to tremble, and tears came to his eyes.

‘It's alright’ Brioke spoke softly, reaching forward and caressing his cheek. ‘Everything will be alright.’

He put his arm around Cam's shoulders, and walked with him.

Cam returned to his bedroom an hour or so later.

‘What took you so long?’ Luke asked him.

‘I was....busy....’

‘Busy doing what?’ Luke asked.

‘Do you want to leave the palace?’

‘What?’ Luke fumbled.

‘I want to leave the palace’ Cam said desperately. ‘Just...at least once...please?’

There was something in his eyes that Luke could not read, but he seemed desperate, sincere.

‘Alright’ Luke said in a quiet voice. ‘We'll go. But...what happened to the bird...?’

It was many weeks later, when Luke's leg had healed enough to no longer need a splint, that the twins left. Luke was still delicate on his leg, he needed to wear a bandage to give him support as his leg had weakened, and the muscles had deteriorated over the weeks. But he would grow strong again. That's what the healer told him anyway.

Using a conveniently placed tree and lots of rope, the boys managed to scale the wall that surrounded the palace grounds, clambering awkwardly over it. Once their feet were back on solid ground, they were free to roam as they pleased.

‘Where should we go first?’ Luke asked eagerly as they moved forwards, turning their backs to the palace and leaving it behind them in their minds.

‘It's been so long since we've left the palace’ Cam told him, ‘it doesn't matter where we go.’

Luke laughed out loud suddenly, grabbing Cam by the arm and running, pulling him with him.

Luke quickly let go of Cam's arm as Cam overtook him. The twins tore through the city streets, catching the attention of many around them as they passed them by. They ran until their muscles ached and their lungs burned. They ran fast enough for the wind to be strong, crossing several districts in no time at all. They ran until they could run no more.

'Wait' Luke gasped doubled over. 'Wait.'

Cam smiled at him, panting heavily and turning back to him. 'Had enough?' he breathed.

'Yeah' Luke huffed. His hand reached down to his leg. 'It's still weak' he whispered.

'It will get stronger' Cam told confidently. 'You just need to keep exercising.'

'I will' Luke said straightening. 'But can we walk from now on?'

Cam smiled at his brother, still breathing heavily. 'Sure' he said. 'Let's go.'

They walked side by side now, sticking close to one another. Many people around stared at them, even stopping what they were doing, slowing down as they walked, even turning back to them.

'Why do they do that?' Luke asked uncertainly, hobbling after Cam and grasping onto his arm.

'They recognise us' Cam told him.

'How?'

Cam paused, turning back to his brother and tugging at his clothes.

'No one dresses like this' Cam said, 'no one...except princes...except us.'

'Oh' Luke mumbled, feeling slightly worried now. 'You don't think they would hurt us do you?'

'No' Cam said without hesitation. 'If any of them try to hurt us, they would suffer severe punishment.'

'By who?'

Cam halted then, pulling Luke back around the corner and pressing himself against the wall, holding Luke to him.

'What is it?' Luke whispered, slightly nervous now.

Cam peered around the corner again, Luke doing the same. Moving away from them, they saw a heavily armoured soldier walking alone. The steel he wore glinting in the sunlight, the sword he wore at his side was large.

'The palace guards' Cam said in a whisper. 'They patrol the city too.'

He grasped Luke firmly by the hand, pulling him across the street and to the narrow alley on the other side.

The brothers moved quickly, gaining distance between themselves and the guard.

They laughed and called out joyfully as they skipped and jumped, leaping high to try to reach the little yellow and orange triangular flags that rang along strings above their heads, crossing the narrow alley and coming out onto the wider street again. They passed a small group of gypsies that sat on crates listlessly, doing nothing other than waiting, or so it seemed. One of them raised his head as the boys jogged past, each holding the other's hand.

'What trouble can we get up to?' Cam asked slyly, slowing to a stop and looking either way down the wide street they had come upon. 'Let's see...' he said deviously.

Cam and Luke ran through the city in search for adventure and mischief.

They chased some chickens, got chased by some dogs, climbed up a high wall to escape, ran across some roves, fell down a chimney and ran around some persons kitchen before fleeing out into the street again and crashing into a passing cart and getting covered in paint the artist was transporting.

Cam and Luke tried in vain to brush from their clothes the paint mixed with soot. The man pulling the cart began to protest, before falling quickly silent as he got a better look at the boys.

‘Royalty?’ the stranger uttered. ‘But what are you doing out here?’

‘Run Luke!’ Cam cried.

Luke gasped exhausted, starting after Cam, tripping and falling on his face before scrabbling up and scurrying after his brother, waving his arms like a windmill before tripping again.

Their shenanigans continued for quite some time until their run became a jog, their jog became a trot, their trot a plod, then a shuffle.

‘No one’s telling us off’ Cam gasped, leaning back against the wall and holding the stitch in his side. ‘This is awesome! I feel like a king!’ he froze suddenly, realising what he had said, before turning to his brother with a smile.

‘Let’s go this way’ Luke told his brother.

They were both so exhausted that their bodies trembled with the excursion.

‘I’m hungry’ Luke told him.

Cam’s hand shot out to a stall beside them and he grabbed several buns from the pile. The shop keeper watched this silently, and without reaction.

Cam handed several buns to Luke, keeping the rest for himself.

‘It’s good’ Luke said taking a bite. ‘It tastes different from the food we get at home, different...but good.’

The boys slowed to a stop then, gazing about them at the streets around. Even now as the city folk walked back forth, their gaze lingered on the boys.

‘They treat us differently than they would others’ Luke said to his brother.

‘That’s because we’re clearly royalty’ Cam answered.

‘You know what would be fun?’ Luke said to him. ‘If we looked like everyone else.’

Cam stared at him, his eyes narrow and mouth half-open as he thought, his mind whirling.

‘Come on’ Cam said, grabbing Luke by the sleeve and running with him. ‘I know what to do.’

Cam led his brother in a random direction until he found what he was looking for. A clothes shop. They entered through the small door at the front.

‘You!’ Cam said to the elderly man behind the counter. ‘Give us some filthy clothes!’

Once Cam managed to convey to the gentleman what he actually meant, he and Luke left the building, carrying peasants clothes bundled up beneath their arms.

‘I’m getting sort of excited’ Luke shivered as he walked beside him. ‘I’m getting butterflies in my stomach.’

‘I have wondered what it’s like to live as a normal boy’ Cam told him. ‘This is going to be fun.’

They hid behind a crate and quickly changed, discarding their other clothes which were now ruined with paint and dirt and soot. They wore now the clothes the shopkeeper had given them. Simple cloth made of dark material and loose fitting.

‘It feels strange’ Cam beamed.

‘You look strange’ Luke grinned at his brother.

‘You look stranger.’

The boys giggled.

‘We can’t steal now’ Luke said. ‘People won’t recognise us now dressed like this.’

‘You’re right’ Cam said turning away.

Cam tensed suddenly, seeing over the top of the crate a short distance away, one of the palace guards.

‘Now the ultimate test’ Cam whispered to his brother. He tapped him on his shoulder. ‘Let’s go.’

They moved through the streets, stopping right in front of the guard and staring up at him.

‘Move!’ the guard snapped at them. ‘Street vermin...’

Luke and Cam parted, allowing the guard to walk between them.

The boys stared at the tall armoured man as he moved on.

They were astonished. Just by a simple change of clothes, and the boys had stepped into a different world, into different lives.

‘Amazing’ Cam breathed. ‘It’s like we’re invisible.’ A slow gleam crossed his face. ‘We can live like one of *them*. We can *be* one of them.’

Cam’s eyes became distant as he gazed across the crowded street.

‘Get out the way’ a gruff man snapped at them as he walked by. ‘Young boys like you shouldn’t be wandering alone out here in the streets, it’s dangerous. Go home to your parents.’

Luke and Cam stared after the man, moving away from the centre of the street and clinging to the walls.

‘They treat us like we’re....like we’re...’

‘What?’ Luke asked.

‘Normal’ Cam finished.

‘Is that good?’

‘I...’ Cam bowed his head. He turned then to his brother. ‘Do you ever wonder’ he began, ‘what life would be like if....if...’

He never finished his sentence, he only looked away.

Together he and Luke watched the people around them.

‘We should come back here again’ Cam said to Luke. ‘Everyday if we can. I don’t want to stay in the palace.’

‘I know what you mean’ Luke nodded. ‘So much has changed since father....since....’

Cam reached toward Luke, taking his hand.

‘We should go back to the palace now’ Cam said. ‘We shouldn’t be gone for too long; people might start to look for us.’

‘We will come back tomorrow won’t we?’ Luke asked him.

‘Of course. But we can’t be seen wearing these clothes at home. We have to keep this our little secret. Ok?’

‘Kay’ Luke nodded, grinning.

Cam held Luke’s head in his hands, leaning forward and resting his forehead against his brother’s, smiling.

‘Let’s go home.’

‘Uhh’ Castello grumbled, standing before the window and pulling back the curtain slightly. ‘What a dreadful evening outside.’ He let go of the curtain, moving back into the room and sitting back in his velvet lined chair at the table. ‘I had hoped to see a better day.’

‘It’s only cloud’ Kirby chuckled, glancing back to him from the small kitchen in which he worked.

‘Cloud that looks like rain’ Castello finished glumly. He looked to Kirby. ‘Have you finished yet?’

‘I’m nearly done’ Kirby said, adding the finishing touch to their meals before serving it. ‘There’ he said happily, carrying it over and placing it on the table. ‘One for you, and one for me.’

‘My my’ Castello said, leaning forwards to look at his plate. ‘It looks delicious.’

‘Eat up’ Kirby gleamed, taking a seat opposite him on the small table.

‘Oh I will I will. Mmm’ he said, shovelling the food onto his fork and into his mouth. ‘It’s good.’

‘Good’ Kirby beamed. ‘Be sure to eat it all up.’

‘Oh I will, I will.’

The two council members, right hands of the king, ate in silence for a few minutes.

‘Why do you cook this yourself?’ Castello asked him suddenly. ‘We have thousands of servants here to do it for you.’

‘Well’ Kirby said off-handily. ‘I don’t know if there are thousands...but...’ he looked down at his meal, lemon garlic tilapia. ‘I hate them.’

‘Hm?’ Castello glanced up.

‘The servants’ Kirby explained. ‘I can’t stand the sight of them. They make me sick. To me they are nothing but flies.’

‘Aww’ Castello said. ‘That’s not fair. They can’t help being servants, and besides...’ he poked his fish, ‘if we didn’t have servants, who would cook this delicious fish?’

‘Do you like it?’ Kirby asked him.

‘Mmmm’ Castello said with a mouthful, chasing his food around on the plate before him.

‘The classic sauce of sautéed butter...the parsley and the lemon juice is just fantastic. And the crackers you’ve added...it just gives it an extra *crunch*.’

‘I’m glad you like it’ Kirby smiled, bowing his head slowly.

‘So why did you cook it yourself and not let a servant do it?’ Castello asked him.

‘I told you that I hate them, and besides he said, this is easy to make.’

‘You will have to show me how one day’ Castello agreed, nodding eagerly.

‘The trick is not to overcook it.’

‘Indeed’ Castello continued to nod. ‘So how is your family?’ he asked. ‘They must be missing you. You’ve been spending so much time here at the palace.’

‘They’ll manage without me’ Kirby said casually waving him away. ‘There’s so much here to worry about, I’ve hardly spared a thought for them. Hey did you hear?’ he hastened suddenly changing topic, ‘Saidear’s gone missing?’

‘No!’ Castello gasped with shock, drawing away from his plate. ‘*Missing* you say...?’

‘Hm. The other council members fear the worst.’ His eyes flickered down to Castello’s fork, watching closely as he shovelled more food into his mouth.

‘This is good’ Castello mumbled. ‘I was so hungry.’

‘Be sure to finish it all’ Kirby said to him. ‘We wouldn’t want it to go to waste.’

‘Of course of course.’

Castello put another forkful in his mouth, as Kirby, sitting opposite him, ate his food delicately and slowly.

‘I’m so glad my family are staying away from the palace’ Castello was saying. ‘They are far away and safe. Who knows what ghastly happenings occur at this place. For all we know, Saidear is responsible for his own disappearance.’

‘A conspiracy?’

‘Well why not? I mean...who can you really trust in this world?’ Castello said, continuing to eat.

‘Indeed’ Kirby mumbled.

‘My daughter is learning to play the violin’ Castello said offhandedly. ‘The sweet dear is so talented. She is my whole world.’

‘Indeed’ Kirby said again. ‘Our children are precious to us.’

‘How are your sons doing with their education?’

‘Stubborn.’

‘Boys can be difficult I hear’ Castello gleamed. ‘I wouldn’t know myself, I’ve had only daughters, and each of them wants to be princesses one day. Isn’t that cute? Hey, you’ve hardly touched your food.’

‘I’m...’ Kirby began, ‘not that hungry.’ He grinned slyly. ‘I’ve got a bit of an upset stomach.’

‘Oh that’s a shame. You’re missing out on this scrumptious fish.’

‘Don’t worry about me’ Kirby glinted. ‘You finish all of yours.’

‘Oh I will I will.’

Castello cleared his plate, chewing meticulously the last bite of his meal.

‘Mmmmm’ he sighed. ‘Delicious.’ He smiled, indicating to Kirby his empty plate. ‘All gone.’

Kirby suddenly contorted his body then, clutching at his stomach.

Castello steepled his fingers together, leaning forwards on the table and regarding Kirby with a smile.

Kirby raised his head one last time, casting Castello a shocked look, before falling forwards onto his plate stone dead, his meal hardly touched.

‘Stupid fool’ Castello sneered, leaning forwards and taking Kirby’s wine from him, draining the goblet in one deep gulp. ‘Trying to poison me. You think I’m that stupid? God that’s good’ he said wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, leaning back in his chair and putting his feet up on the table. ‘Only the best wine served at the palace’ he said staring up at the ceiling. ‘I will have to find some more.’

Castello reached into his coat, pulling out a crow’s mask and placing up upon his face, staring at the room through the large glass eyes of the mask.

There came a knock on the door.

‘Enter!’

A young man entered the room, Castello's personal servant whom he always kept close to him. He would take orders from no one else.

'Is it done?' the young man asked.

'What does it look like?' Castello told him. 'Get rid of that' he pointed to Kirby's dead body.

'Where are you going?' the young servant asked as Castello rose from his seat and sailed past him, hiding away the mask again.

'I'm going to find some more of that delicious wine' Castello replied. 'Would you like to share some with me?'

'Oh yes' the young man said eagerly.

'Then get rid of *him*, then you can join me.'

'Ok' the servant said. 'No problem.'

A short time later, and the body was thrown from one of the windows high up in the palace, falling into the river below, broken by the jagged rocks. No one found him. His body drifted out into the open sea, eyed pecked out and flesh torn at by the gulls and crows, until it sunk into the waters, where the sea life feasted on him, leaving behind nothing but bones and memories of a life that once was.

The very next day, the boys returned to the streets, and the day after that; and the one after that too.

It was their habit now, to wake early, join their indifferent mother for breakfast, sneak into the garden after breakfast and climb over the wall and escape into the city. They would return only when it began to grow late, to join their mother again for the evening meal. Cam was happy; he was even seeing less of Brioke. It had been weeks since he had last run into him.

He spent his days with his brother now.

Today, Cam and Luke sat side by side upon a low wall, nibbling on bread they had brought with them from the palace. It was a harder life in the city they knew. People treated them harshly, and they learnt quickly to keep to themselves. They shared a different life now, in the day they would enter the streets and live as 'normal' children would. At the end of the day, they would return to the palace, and sleep as princes.

'Here' Cam said to Luke, offering him the last corner of bread.

'No thanks' Luke waved. 'I'm full.'

Cam tossed the bread over his shoulder behind him. They sat in silence for several minutes, simply watching the world around them.

'It's such a nice day' Cam sighed, leaning back and kicking his feet happily.

'Yeah' it is Luke beamed raising his head to the sky also. 'Cam' he whispered then. 'Look.'

Cam looked ahead to see a small group of children watching them.

Cam and Luke watched them curiously back. They were about the same age as themselves. There were five of them, three boys and two girls.

A carriage passed through the streets between them. The children waited for it to go by, before crossing the street.

Cam and Luke watched as the children skipped over to them.

'Hey there' the older boy said. 'We've not see you around here before.'

'We're new here' Cam replied, not missing a beat.

‘Oh yeah?’ the older boy said beaming. ‘Where did you come from?’

‘We just moved here’ Cam told them, ‘our parents live nearby.’

‘What are you doing?’ Luke whispered to him tugging at his sleeve.

‘They don’t know anything about us’ Cam whispered back behind his hand so that the other children could not hear him. ‘We could make our lives whatever we want it to be.’

Luke’s expression lit up at that, and he turned to face the children again.

‘Our mother is a jeweller’ he told them. ‘Or father is a....a...’

‘Warrior’ Cam finished with a grin. ‘He’s not around much. He’s in distant lands fighting...evil.’

‘Cool’ the children all said.

‘We’d love to see your house’ the younger girl said. ‘I’ve never seen a jeweller’s house before. I bet you’re really rich aren’t you?’

‘Actually our mother is sick’ Cam told them. ‘She spends most of her time in bed nowadays, so I’m afraid you can’t come over.’

‘That terrible’ the young girl said.

The older boy turned to them. ‘My name is Anthony’ he said. ‘This is Craig’ he said pointing out the middle boy, ‘and Ian’ he pointed to the younger boy. ‘And this is Suzan and Megan’ he said, indicating the older and younger girls.

‘I’m Cam. And this is my brother Luke. We’re twins.’

‘Does that mean you were born at the same time?’ Suzan asked.

‘Of course it does’ Craig said. ‘Stupid girl.’

‘Shut your face!’ she snapped angrily.

‘Do you want to come home with us?’ Anthony asked them. ‘We can show you where we live.’

‘Yeah!’ Luke beamed. ‘I’ve never seen a commoner’s house before.’

Luke jabbed him sharply in the ribs with his elbow, hissing at him.

‘We don’t say commoners house you idiot.’

‘I mean...’ Luke corrected himself hastily. ‘We’d love to.’

‘Then follow us’ Anthony said to them.

The small group of children turned and ran. Cam and Luke slid off the wall and made after them, Luke’s leg fully healed now; he was able to keep up easily with the others.

‘Where are you going?’ Cam asked uncertainly as the children, instead of running down the alleyway they were heading, veered off the left and slipped through a grate hidden in the corner of the street.

‘It’s an escape route’ the little girl said. ‘We all use it.’

‘Escape route’ Luke replied nervously. ‘I don’t know if I like the sound of that.’

‘Oh don’t be so pathetic’ Craig sneered at them, shoving Suzan through the hole before following after her.

Suzan fell forwards into it, complaining bitterly of this treatment, but she was ignored.

‘Come on’ Ian said encouragingly to them. ‘It’s perfectly safe. We’ll all fit.’

‘What if it’s dangerous?’ Luke whispered to his brother nervously.

Cam hesitated. ‘It’s weird I know.’ He turned back to the grate all the children had slipped through. They were all gone now.

‘Are you coming!’ echoed a voice from through the grate. ‘Hurry up or you’ll get lost.’

Cam crouched down, slipping through the hole.

‘Cam!’ Luke hissed, frowning furiously after him.

‘Come on’ Cam told him. ‘I’m going in. Are you following me?’

Luke glanced about him, fearful suddenly of being left alone, more than he feared entering the tunnel below.

He crouched down, entering the underground through the grate.

‘Close it behind you’ Anthony told him, and Luke did so. ‘Now follow me.’

They walked for a short time along the narrow tunnel.

‘So what kind of an escape route is this?’ Luke asked the children who walked ahead of them, trying to sound casual. ‘Why do you need it?’

‘Oh we need it’ Anthony answered shortly. ‘This tunnel has saved more than one life.’

‘Saved a life?’ Luke echoed.

He gulped loudly.

‘It’s alright brother’ Cam told him quietly, grasping his hand tightly. ‘We’ll be alright as long as we’re together.’

Luke let out a breath, feeling a little calmer for Cam being beside him.

‘Ok’ Anthony said slowing to a stop. ‘Here we are.’

He pushed the grate they had reached above them and crawled through the hole, turning back and helping the other through until only Cam and Luke were left.

Cam stepped forward cautiously, looking up through the square hole and into the open world above.

‘It’s alright’ Anthony said offering his hand down to Cam who stood in the dark.

Cam hesitated only for a moment, before taking the boy’s hand and climbing through the hole.

He turned around and helped Luke up, pulling him to his feet.

The boys straightened, glancing about them at their new environment. They were in a courtyard within a home of some sorts. A balcony on the second level ran all the way around them, and on the ground the space was open, occupied only by benches and tables scattered haphazardly about the place. There were barrels stacked here and there, and a line over their heads on which hung clothes.

‘Hey guys’ said a girl sitting on the bottom of the wooden steps which led to the level above them. She was young, wearing a pretty little dress with a kitten sitting on her lap. ‘Who are *they*?’ she asked, pointing at Cam and Luke.

‘We found them’ Megan told the girl dancing up to her.

‘Like strays?’ the little girl said beaming. ‘Like how I found this kitten?’ she said hugging it.

‘Yeah’ Megan said turning back to Cam and Luke. ‘I’m afraid we can’t keep them though. They have parents.’

‘What do you mean?’ Cam asked Megan.

‘We’re all orphans’ Megan told the twins. ‘Even the older children.’

‘How many of you are there?’ Luke asked her.

‘And how old are the oldest here?’ Cam added. ‘What is this place?’

‘Well what do we have here?’ an elder voice spoke out.

Cam and Luke gasped in surprise at the new figure. She was not a child like the rest of them here; she was a mature woman, but still young.

‘Boys’ the kindly woman smiled, holding a basket of clothes at her side. ‘Twins.’ Her long blonde hair was tied up in a loose bun, and she wore a faded dress of pale yellow with a white apron. ‘Aren’t you two sweet.’

She continued her descent down the wooden stairs towards them, looking almost angelic as she smiled warmly.

‘KARI!’ came another voice, howling. ‘KAAARI!’

One of the shutters above their heads opened and a male figure leaned out the window shouting.

‘Kari! Where are my clothes! You’ve taken my clothes again! And you’ve tidied my room! I don’t know where all my stuff is! Where is my *STUFF*?!’

‘YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH CRAKE!’ Kari, the yellow haired woman carrying the basket screeched back. ‘And don’t feed me any more of your crap!’

Crake ground his teeth glaring at her furiously.

He leapt through the window, grabbing onto the clothes line with one hand and sliding down the line, letting go when he was close enough to the ground not to hurt himself. Landing cat-like on all fours and straightening up, he glared at Cam and Luke with displeasure, wearing only a towel around his waist. He addressed the boys as Kari protested loudly behind him, picking up all the clothes that had tumbled from the line when he slid down it.

‘Who are you?’ he snapped at them.

‘We found them’ Ian the young boy told Crake. ‘They were sitting in the streets.’

‘Are they homeless?’ Crake asked Ian, leaning forwards with his hands resting upon his knees as he came to their level; staring at them closely.

Cam stared at the ground uncomfortably for a few seconds, before glaring back at the man, feeling a flicker of annoyance in him.

‘Hey!’ Cam snapped at Crake. ‘We’re standing right here you know. You want to know something just ask. We’re not stupid.’

‘Ha!’ Crake barked, straightening again. ‘You have spirit.’

‘Cover yourself up’ Kari snarled at him, having finished tying the fallen clothes back on the line.

Crake turned to her, approaching the basket she had put on the floor. He dropped his towel.

Kari shrieked in horror, darting up to him and picking the towel up again, lifting it up to cover him.

‘Have some decency you fucking pervert’ she hissed at him. ‘There are children about.’

‘I’m only naked’ Crake said carelessly back at her as he began to rummage through the clothes in the basket.

‘Stop that’ Kari snarled as he picked a shirt from the pile and began to put it on. ‘It’s still damp.’

‘It’ll dry’ Crake told her. He picked some trousers from the basket, and began to put them on too.

‘That’s not even yours’ Kari protested, as she continued to hold the towel up, hiding him from the children.

‘It is now’ Crake grinned back at her.

As this was happening, Cam was covering Luke’s eyes with a hand, and Luke was covering Cam’s eyes with a hand as they stood side by side.

At that moment two other children aged about twelve came running through the courtyard.

‘Alex!’ Kari snapped. ‘Leave your sister alone!’

‘But Boe is taking my stuff again!’ Alex snapped.

‘I did not!’ his sister Boe protested back as Alex grabbed her, pulling her hair. ‘*Help!*’

Kari marched up to them, forcing them apart and shaking them. ‘Stop it both of you!’

‘It gets a little crazy around here’ Anthony shrugged apologetically at Cam and Luke. ‘There are a lot of us.’

‘How many are there?’ Cam asked him.

‘Oh gosh’ Anthony thought then. ‘Maybe twenty...five....thirty...?’

‘That’s a lot.’

‘We’re a family’ Anthony said to them. ‘We are all orphans here. We were saved from the streets by our father, Julius. He is our master and the keeper of this home.’

‘So this place is an orphanage?’ Luke asked him tentatively, clinging onto his brother’s arm for comfort.

‘No’ Anthony replied, speaking loudly over the voice of Kari as she scolded Alex and Boe. ‘This is a thieves guild.’

‘A thieves guild?’ Cam repeated. ‘What’s that?’

Anthony smirked knowingly, shoving his hands in his pocket and tapping his foot on the ground. He strolled up to Cam, walking close to him, brushing his shoulder with his body as he went by.

‘What’s this?’ Anthony said as Cam and Luke turned back to face him.

‘Whoa!’ Cam said in awe as he stared at the penny Anthony had swiped from his pocket, something he had found in the streets hours earlier and had picked up.

‘It’s not worth much’ Anthony said to him, studying the coin closely. ‘It *might* buy you a crust of bread if you’re lucky.’

‘How did you do that?’ Luke said in shock.

Anthony smirked at the twins again, tossing the coin back to Cam, who caught it in the air.

‘Practice’ Anthony told them. ‘I’m by no means the best at thieving here, there are loads of others who are better than me, but I have *some* skill at least.’

‘I want to learn how to do that’ Cam told him eagerly, balling his fists. ‘I want to know how you did that.’

‘You want to be a thief?’ Crake spoke loudly then.

Cam and Luke raised their head to him.

He stood there with his hands on his hips, frowning at them.

‘But what would your parents think?’

‘They don’t care’ Luke glowered.

‘I don’t know’ Crake turned away from the twins. ‘We only teach this skill to our family.’

‘Your family?’

‘Everyone you see here lives here, and there are more. This is our home....our sanctuary....we don’t accept those who already have a home, and we don’t teach our skills to outsiders.’

‘We want to be part of this family’ Cam urged them. ‘We want to live here and learn the things you know.’

‘Sorry kids’ Crake smirked. ‘We can’t help you.’

Cam gritted his teeth, glaring at Crake, spurred suddenly by desire and determination.

I want to be part of this life he thought desperately. *I want it more than anything.*

‘Anthony’ Crake said. ‘I think you should take them home.’

‘Awww’ Anthony whined. ‘But why can’t they stay? Julius might let them if you ask.’

‘Julius is a very busy man’ Crake replied. ‘He’s not *borrowing* children from anywhere. These kids already have parents. We don’t have a good enough reason to keep you’ Crake said raising an eyebrow to them. ‘Sorry boys, but I think it’s best if you return home.’

‘I’m sorry’ Anthony said to them shortly after, once he had shown them the way out again, this time through the front doors. ‘We have to listen to our elders. It’s the rules; we have to all abide by them.’

‘We’ll get in’ Cam said to him. ‘We *will* be accepted. Whatever it takes, I want to belong there; I want to live the life you do.’

‘But why?’ Anthony asked them. ‘It’s hard...and dangerous...and you have a good home you told us. Your parents are wealthy. Why would you want the life we have?’

‘It’s not as great as it first sounds’ Cam said bowing his head. ‘Our lives...’ he shared a glance with Luke, who stared at him silently, eyes wide. Cam smirked then, turning back to Anthony. ‘We have our reasons’ he finished. He tilted his head back to the sky then. ‘It’s growing late’ he said. ‘Luke and I should be getting home now, but we’ll be back’ he said to Anthony. ‘We will definitely be back.’

‘I’ll keep an eye out for you’ Anthony told them. ‘And anyway...you know where we are now....just keep it a secret ok? Our father Julius wouldn’t want others to know.’

‘Sure’ Cam nodded.

Anthony turned and darted off then, without another word.

‘Are you sure about this?’ Luke asked Cam nervously once Anthony had gone. ‘You want to be part of their guild?’

‘Yes’ Cam mumbled back, staring after Anthony as he disappeared around a corner. ‘I want it more than anything.’

I want to be free of Brioke he thought silently to himself, *and I want Luke with me when I escape...*

Brioke walked down the corridor, beside him was Stire, matching his footsteps. The two were deep in discussion.

‘I’m just saying’ Stire grumbled, glancing suspiciously at the corridor all around them as if something was going to hurt them, a trap, a chandelier falling on their heads and killing them, an assassin leaping out from nowhere. ‘This is as dangerous a time for us as it is for anyone else. Saidear still has not been found and Kirby is now missing.’

‘Well I don’t know about Saidear’ Brioke spoke in a rumble, ‘but whatever ill has happened to Kirby, he deserved it. That slippery eel was nothing but poison. I for one am glad that he’s gone. I’m sure he’s dead. I doubt we’ll ever see him again.’

‘You shouldn’t talk like that’ Stire frowned at him. ‘He was a right hand of the king’ he told Brioke, ‘like we are. He was one of us.’

‘Even so’ Brioke replied sombrely, ‘good riddance is what I say.’

‘I think you are right however about his disappearance’ Stire added. ‘I’m sure he is dead, though I hate to say it.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Anyway’ Stire went on, ‘I’d watch yourself if I were you. And don’t trust anyone besides yourself.’

‘I know.’

They slowed to a stop then.

‘This is where we part’ Brioke said to him. ‘My office is this way.’

‘Very well’ Stire replied. ‘Take care of yourself.’

‘And you.’

Stire nodded, walking the other way down the corridor as Brioke turned, continuing on.

He walked the silent halls for several minutes, before entering one of the smaller rooms off the main hall he passed through.

He opened the door, freezing in horror at what he saw.

The figure clad in black sat on the chest of another with his back to Brioke, pummelling the victim’s face, smashing the bottle into him again and again.

The man he sat on was dead, blood soaked the carpet around his head, and as Brioke’s attention drifted slightly, he saw two more bodies nearby, recognising them as Daizel and Celia, members of the left hand of the king.

The figure with the bottle froze suddenly, head whipping around to see Brioke standing there. Brioke saw the man below him. His name had been Dorian.

In an instant the murder rose, charging towards him. Brioke was slow to react, seeing the assassin’s head covered by a cloth, with only the eyes visible and lined in black. *Make up. A woman?* He managed to deflect the blade from his gut just in time. Brioke jumped back, avoiding the swipes made towards him before lunging forwards himself and pushing the figure back.

The figure groaned, hunched over and holding themselves where they had been struck, it seemed they bore some hidden injury. Brioke saw a ring upon the assassin’s finger then, a common ring made of blue stone and worn by several members of the council, on the right hand and the left hand of the king.

A man? Brioke thought briefly, before the assassin threw between them a smoke bomb.

Brioke stepped back, hand going to his mouth as he began to cough.

By the time the smoke cleared, the stranger was gone, and Brioke was left alone with three bodies.

He looked about him.

Dorian had been beaten to death. Daizel had been strangled, and Celia? It wasn’t clear how he had died.

Brioke turned around, walking swiftly in the opposite direction. No doubt it would look suspicious for him if he were to be found here, or even if he were to report what he had seen.

Who would believe him?

And so he just left, and pretended that nothing had happened.

That evening, Cam and Luke sat at the long table in the dining hall. Their mother ate slowly, casting a glance over at them, before lowering her head. She stabbed her food, lifting it to her mouth, pausing as she watched the boys, before putting the food in her mouth and chewing meticulously.

Cam and Luke were sitting side by side close to one another, their food hardly touched.

‘So’ Miranda spoke up, breaking the silence. ‘Have you boys been keeping busy?’

Cam and Luke glanced at each other.

‘Well?’

‘Yes’ Cam said shortly.

‘Have you been keeping out of trouble?’

‘Yes mother.’

‘Where do you go in the days?’ she asked them.

‘We...’ Cam began, ‘sit and read...we play board games. We just try to keep out of the way.’

‘It’s best that way’ Miranda told them. ‘We are living in dangerous times.’ She leant forwards on her elbows. ‘Keep to yourselves and stay safe.’

She pushed her plate away when she had finished, rising to her feet and sauntering from the room without speaking to the boys again.

The echo from the door slamming rang through the dining hall.

Moments later, a servant hurried up to the table, clearing the queen’s empty plate away and scurrying out of sight.

Cam watched her go, before staring down, back to his own plate where his food was getting cold. Luke glanced sideways at him.

‘What are you thinking brother?’ Luke asked him.

Cam didn’t answer.

Luke rose, holding the bottom of his chair he shuffled closer to Cam.

Cam blinked as Luke leant into him, hugging his arm and resting his chin on his shoulder.

‘Cam...’ Luke whispered, ‘I’m cold...’

Cam turned to him, wrapping his arms around his brother.

‘Can we go to bed now?’ Luke asked him. ‘I’m tired.’

‘No’ Cam whispered back. ‘We can’t...not yet.’

‘Why not?’

Cam chewed his lip in thought. ‘I want to get into that guild.’

‘Why?’ Luke mumbled into his shoulder. ‘Is it really that important?’

‘I don’t feel safe here anymore’ Cam said to him. ‘I want to get away.’

Luke was silent for a moment, as he thought about what Cam had said.

‘I feel the same’ Luke said glumly after a time. ‘Things have been so different since father died, but won’t it be dangerous?’

He raised his head to Cam.

‘Do you think we could really do it?’ Luke asked him. ‘Do you really think we could get away from here and join that guild?’

‘Yes’ Cam replied without pause. ‘I know it will be hard...’

‘But they said they didn’t want us.’

‘They said they don’t trust us’ Cam corrected.

‘You think we could change their minds?’

Cam bowed his head, resting his cheek upon Luke's hair.

'I remember the stories father used to read to us' Cam said. 'Do you remember Luke? Do you remember those stories?'

'Yes' Luke breathed, still holding his brother.

'They said they were a thieves guild' Cam said to him, 'they said that they teach children how to steal.'

'Only children who have no home.'

'They know nothing about us' Cam told him, hugging him tighter. 'Remember...our stories...our pasts....can be whatever we want it to be.'

'You mean we lie?' Luke asked him, leaning back and staring into his brother's face.

Cam released him.

'I don't like to lie.'

'Would you rather stay here?' Cam asked him.

'....No....'

'Good.'

'But will that be enough?' Luke asked as Cam rose from his seat, moving away. 'They probably won't believe us if we just lie to them and change our story.'

'Thieves...' Cam spoke slowly. He hummed to himself in thought for a moment, before raising his head. 'Come on' he said turning back to Luke. 'Follow me.'

'Where are we going?' Luke asked scampering after him across the dining hall.

'I have an idea' Cam whispered back to Luke, pulling the tall door back and leaving the hall, slipping into the corridor beyond.

'What idea?' Luke huffed impatiently. 'Tell me.'

Cam ran down the corridors and stairs quickly, moving swiftly through the dark, his brother following closely after him. They moved to the higher levels.

'Where are we going?' Luke asked again. He faltered when they reached the door to the queen's bedroom. 'Why are we here?' Luke frowned.

'Mother has many valuable jewels' Cam smiled back at Luke happily.

Luke's expression brightened suddenly. 'You want to steal from her and give the jewels to the guild.' He hesitated then, his initial excitement flickering. 'Do you think that would work? Do you think that would convince them to let us join?'

'It would show our loyalty' Cam replied. 'It would show that we are serious.'

'But we're just kids' Luke said doubtfully. 'What if they don't take us seriously?'

'From what I saw' Cam told his brother, 'most of *them* were *just kids*.'

They waited outside their mother's room for several hours in the dark, waiting for the moment where she would be fast asleep. In that time they huddled together, sharing their body heat against the cold, where a chill seeped into the corridor through the creaky windows around them. They could hear the wind howling through the spacious building.

'It's scary out here' Luke whispered to Cam shivering.

'Come on' Cam said quietly back, rising and pulling Luke to his feet. 'I think she would be asleep by now. But she's a light sleeper...we have to be quiet.'

Luke stared at his brother, giving a single silent nod.

'I'm ready' he said.

Cam held Luke by the hand as he opened the door to their mother's room, doing so ever so slowly.

The boys stepped in.

Interlude start

The masked figure stared at the screen, pressing a button on the keyboard before him; then pressing it again, then again.

The picture before him changed, and he saw several images from inside the palace. The dining hall, the many libraries, the boy's bedroom...

'Hmm' the figure said behind his mask as he searched through the palace. 'Where are those boys? Where are those young princes gone?'

Interlude end

The next day

Cam emptied the contents of the small bag upon the table. Crake's initial protests at seeing them again were swiftly cut short as he gazed down at the jewels piled up upon the wood.

His eyes grew large.

'Whoa...' he managed to say, reaching forwards and picking up one of the blood-red stones, staring at it closely. 'Where did you get these?'

'Our mother gave them to us' Cam lied.

Crake's hand reached for a gold necklace, feeling the metal between his fingers.

'This is incredible' Crake breathed. He looked past the necklace then at the two boys.

'Why would she give these to you?' Crake asked them. 'Does she know you're giving them away?'

'She's dying' Cam mumbled quietly. 'She's not going to be around much longer.'

'Why?' Crake said, lowering his hand, still holding the necklace.

'She's sick.....she has been for a long time.'

'And your father?' Crake pressed.

'I'm sorry...' Cam bowed his head, holding his hands behind his back. 'I lied before. He's been dead for...' Cam drew a breath. 'He was a soldier. He was killed a long time ago...in a distant land...we haven't seen him in years...he hasn't been around for most of our lives' Cam said.

Luke stood beside him silently, biting his tongue as he clung to his brother nervously, listening to Cam spout these lies.

'Is your mother sure to die?' Crake asked them.

'Yes.'

'And you have no other family?'

'No.'

He frowned down at them. 'Fine' he sighed. 'Come with me. I'll take you to Julius.'

Crake collected up the jewels and stones and returned them back to the bag, carrying it with him as he turned on his heel, marching up the wooden steps to the balcony above.

‘Well?’ Crake said impatiently to the boys who hung back in the courtyard. ‘Are you coming?’

Cam stepped forward, pulling Luke with him; he walked with his arm around him.

Crake’s steps were wide as he ascended the stairs, pausing at the top and waiting for the boys to catch up.

Cam and Luke reached the top of the steps and Crake continued onwards, his heavy footsteps thumping on the wooden floor of the balcony that ran around the inside of the building around the courtyard. Cam glanced down the courtyard below them as they went. It was quiet now, unlike the day before when they had seen several figures, the ‘children’ as they fought amongst themselves. The five children who had introduced them to this place where nowhere to be seen, the fighting siblings were gone, as was Kari. Only the little girl with the little white kitten remained, sitting in the quiet courtyard alone.

‘Why does she stay in the courtyard when the others go?’ Cam asked.

‘She’s sick’ Crake replied. ‘The other members of our family come and go throughout the day as they please. But she has to stay here for her own safety.’

‘Why?’ Cam asked tentatively.

‘She’s dying’ Crake finished.

‘Is there nothing that can save her?’ Cam asked.

‘No.’

Cam glanced back down to the young girl, who must have been only about six in age. He looked at her more closely now than he had done the day before. Cam saw the girl with the kitten asleep on her lap watching him. He noticed then that she looked a little pale, a little skinny, her eyes a little sunken.

‘What is her name?’ Cam asked.

‘Lily’ Crake replied shortly.

He came to a stop before one of the doors; he paused, waiting for the boys to catch up again, before opening the door and stepping in.

Cam and Luke lingered outside for a moment, before Crake beacons them in. Cam and Luke shuffled into the room and Crake closed the door after them.

The boys gazed at the room about them. It was a humid day today, and the room they stood in now was stuffy, with thick red curtains hanging over the windows. There were many things about the room. Bookshelves filled with books, dressers with shelves creaking with an assortment of various ornaments, globes and statues and relics and lamps and wooden sculptures and pieces made of expensive metals and gold, alongside several boxes with holes in from which seeped wisps of smoke. The incense here burned strongly.

Crake stepped forwards towards the four-poster bed at the back of the room, his heavy footfalls muffled by the lush red carpet placed upon the wooden floor.

‘Julius’ Crake said, reaching out to the sleeping figure and shaking him lightly. ‘There’s someone here to see you.’

As Crake spoke to the sleeping figure, Cam’s attention drifted to the room again. He saw several chests stacked against one wall, and smaller chests upon the dressers, one of which

was open, from it spilled a vast amount of coin, so many that the lid could not be closed properly.

The sleeping Julius groaned as he slowly woke, turning over and sitting up in bed.

He was a slender figure, aged in his late fifties, with a shaggy beard and scruffy hair.

He groaned again, running his hand down his face. 'What?' he said shortly, speaking loudly.

'These kids want to join our guild' Crake told him.

'What happened to your parents and family?' Julius grumbled to them, leaning forward in bed and glaring at them.

They didn't answer, even Cam who had been caught on the spot was unable to speak, his words stuck in his throat.

'They say their father has died and that their mother will die soon' Crake answered for them.

'From sickness?' Julius asked. 'How soon?'

Crake glanced expectantly at the boys, waiting for an answer.

'It's hard to say' Cam spoke up. 'She is bed bound...she hardly eats or drinks anymore.'

'Soon then' Julius said coldly. 'Do you have any other family?'

'None that we know of.'

'Hm.' Julius turned to Crake. 'Do you trust them?'

'No' Crake replied shortly. 'But they gave us these to show their loyalty' he said, producing the bag and slipping his hand into it, pulling out several of the jewels and holding them in his palm, several of the necklaces hanging between his fingers.

Julius reached to his bedside table, pulling open the draw and brining out a little glass. He took one of the jewels that Crake held, looking through the little glass at it closely. 'It's real' he said flatly after a few seconds. 'Where did you get these from?' he asked the boys.

'Our mother' Cam told him. 'She is a jeweller with lots of money. She won't notice they're gone though' Cam added hastily. 'Not now anyway...'

'Why do you want to join us?' Julius asked them.

'Our father is dead' Cam told him. 'Our mother will die soon, and we have no family.'

'Do you know what we do to those who betray us?' Julius said to the boys.

'No' Cam mumbled, a little nervous now.

'We are a very close family' Julius explained, 'we look after each other, but what we do is illegal. We are liars and thieves, but we care for our own....but....those who betray us...are not only rejected by us, but killed by us. We will accept you into our family, as long as you understand that if you betray us we will kill you.'

'What if...?' Cam stammered, feeling a little frightened, '...something happens...an accident...?'

'We're not trying to catch you out' Julius told him. 'We will look after our own if they make a mistake, but if you knowingly and maliciously try to harm us, or cheat us, then we will punish you, and if you betray us we will kill you, but if you are good...then we will treat you like family.'

The boys hesitated.

'Do you still want to be part of this family?' Julius asked, as Crake stood silently beside the bed, regarding the boys with a hawk-like expression.

Cam glanced to Luke beside him, clinging to his arm with wide eyes. He was scared suddenly; Cam could see he was truly frightened. But he did not speak. Cam knew that Luke trusted him, more than anything.

‘We accept’ Cam spoke for both of them. ‘We want to be part of this family.’

Julius reached towards his bedside table again, taking a paper and quill and laying them on his lap before him, quill at the ready.

‘So what are your names?’ he asked them.

‘Waaw! I can’t believe you did it!’ Anthony beamed, squeezing his hands together and jumping up and down excitedly. ‘How did you convince him?’

‘Brilliance’ Cam smirked smugly.

‘Don’t be so bigheaded’ Luke frowned beside him. ‘I was so nervous. Julius is sort of scary.’

‘Oh he’s not so bad’ Anthony waved them away. ‘Anyway’ he beamed. ‘Welcome to the family!’

Around them the other children; and some older ‘children’ welcomed them. There were the five children they had first met the previous day, the fighting siblings, and Kari and Crake, who stood glaring over them with arms folded. Around them, were many other children they had not met yet, they totalled nearly thirty in number.

‘Hey’ a dark-skinned girl said moving up to Cam and Luke, ‘I’m Lea; it’s nice to meet you.’

‘I’m Matt!’ a boy called out from the back waving at them.

‘I’m Tracy!’ called another.

It took several minutes for them to be introduced to the large family. The children were kind, and they welcomed the twins with open arms.

‘You’re one of us now’ Anthony smirked. ‘We’ll look after you. We all look out for each other here. If you need help, we will help you. If we need help...you will help us. Ok?’

Cam and Luke nodded eagerly at this. ‘Ok.’

‘Now’ Crake spoke up, ‘it’s time we taught you to steal.’

He knelt before the boys, reaching towards each with a hand and touching their ears simultaneously. ‘We will teach you many things’ he said to them, withdrawing his hands from the back of their ears and producing a shining coin in each hand as he did so. ‘By the time we are finished with you here’ he said, ‘you will know more than a trick or two.’

He gave the two coins each to the boys, who took them eagerly with wide eyes. They were in awe as to how he did it. His sleeves were short.

‘Now’ Crake said rising to his feet. ‘I think I’m a bit tall for you to start practicing on first. Anthony’ he said to him, ‘come here.’

Anthony trotted up to him, taking his place beside him.

‘Right’ Crake began, producing another coin from thin air and slipping it into Anthony’s pocket. ‘I want to you steal the coin from Anthony, without him knowing that you did.’

‘I don’t think we can’ Cam spoke up.

‘You can’t’ Crake replied. ‘Not yet anyway. But you have to begin somewhere.’ He tilted his head, regarding the twins. ‘Now’ he said. ‘Begin.’

Cam and Luke exchanged nervous glances, feeling out of sorts as the many other children in the small dining hall watched in silent expectation.

‘You go first’ Luke said.

Cam swallowed the lump in his throat, taking a deep breath.
He took a step towards Anthony.

Many weeks passed

Cam and Luke sat side by side on the bench, sitting on the edge and kicking their feet happily. Around them in their small group were some of the other children, Anthony, Harry, Alex and Suzan. Huddled together they continued to eat, nibbling on their snacks and sweets they had gotten from the stalls around them.

Today was a special day. It was a festival, a celebration.

The celebration was one that happened only once every eighty years. It was a religious holiday that celebrated the first rays of sunlight that shone in the sky after an eighty year long winter. The holy stories tell of the god Ezla imprisoning the goddess Micro for eighty years beneath the rocky earth in a great cavern. He did this because he was madly in love with her, and wanted her for himself. Without the warm in the world that Micro created, everything grew cold. When at last she was freed eighty years later, a great party was held to celebrate her return. And this was the holiday people rejoiced in today.

It was a precious day for many, and one that most would see only once in their lifetime. The party started in the morning, and continued late into the night.

The fireworks were still to come.

‘This is so good’ Cam mumbled with his mouth full, frowning down at the delicious toffee apple he was munching on, savouring every bite.

‘I like this stuff’ Luke mumbled from beside him, staring at his own sweet.

‘I don’t even know what that is’ Cam said to him, staring at the paper bowl that Luke held, within sat what looked like multicoloured dust.

‘It’s sugar’ Luke told him, using his hand to shovel more of it into his mouth. ‘Sweet sweet sugar.’

‘You have a spoon to eat that with you know’ Cam told him.

‘I know. But it’s more fun to use your hands.....mmmmmm....berry flavour.....you know, we never get this sort of food back at the p-’

Cam swiftly hit him over the head to shut him up before could say the word *palace*.

‘This is the best day’ Anthony gleamed from beside them, looking across the streets that were now brimming with people.

The city now was a hive of activity, usually busy on most days, now the streets were packed throughout.

‘We have to make the most of this you know’ he told the others. ‘It may be a special holiday, but we still have work to do, today now more than ever.’

‘It never ends does it’ Harry sighed.

‘Of course not’ Anthony told them. ‘We always have to eat, and it takes a lot of work to look after our large family.’

‘Our family’ Suzan grumbled. ‘It grows larger by the month. ‘I’m not saying we shouldn’t accept them all...but...’

'I know' Alex spoke up. 'The bigger our family is, the more we have to steal and the more risk we put ourselves in.'

'We can't help it' Suzan whined. 'We all have to eat! Why do we get in trouble for trying to survive? None of us want to be criminals.'

Cam watched her silently as she spoke. Over the last few weeks, life for the guild had gradually changed, slowly becoming worse as life became harder.

The council, the group of men that had taken over the king's role back at the palace were growing stronger in influence, their power spreading like a sickness. They were using fear to control now; one of their means was through religion, as their claws sunk deeper into the holy temples. Their authority had leaked into the lives of the holy men and women who lived there, their lives, and the lives of everyone who was involved with the temples (and even those who weren't) now belonged to the council. They had started burning supposed heathens. People were becoming afraid as law tightened and punishments grew more severe. Many children were left without families, and the guild had taken many new members in a short time, which made it harder for them to live.

The more they stole, the more they risked being caught.

They were living on a razor's edge.

Cam ground his teeth, suddenly feeling frustrated and helpless.

Why? Why did father have to die so soon? Dam the council's existence. I wish with all my heart that Luke and I were older; we could avoid all of this...we could have done something...

'I hate the way things are now' Suzan went on. 'Why are things the way they are? It's all so hard...'

'I know' Alex growled at her. 'You think I don't know? I've lost my sister because of the way things have changed.'

Boe, Alex's twin sister had been captured by authorities for stealing. She had been locked up in one of the prisons and never seen again. Attempts had been made to try to find her, but they were all in vain.

She was now presumed dead

'I'm scared' Suzan cried, hugging herself as tears ran down her cheeks. 'I'm afraid...that I will be next.'

'Keep it together' Alex snapped shoving her. 'We're all in the same position.'

'Come on let's not argue' Anthony said to them as Cam and Luke turned away. 'At least for today let's be happy.'

'We still have work to do' Harry reminded them.

'You're right, we should get to it' Anthony said rising. 'Come one' he said loudly to the others, clapping his hands as they rose to their feet, Suzan brushing the tears from her eyes as she did so. 'No rest for the wicked, or so they say' Anthony told them.

'We'll meet back at home in a few hours then?' Alex asked him glumly.

'Yeah' Anthony nodded. 'They'll be serving food by then. Don't want to be late and miss it...I don't fancy going hungry again....'

'Right' Alex spoke with determination, gritting his teeth. 'Let's go!'

They all went their separate ways, each of them heading in opposite directions away from one another, as was the way. It wasn't always practical to move in groups, as many would be

more suspicious of them if they did so. Especially the palace guards. Even Cam and Luke nowadays spent more time apart than they did together, which they would normally never do. But in this new life that they were living, this half life, they were forced to do what they were told, to appear 'normal', or else they would be rejected. And this life here, despite its dangers, made the twins feel safer than staying at the palace, it made them feel loved and wanted, and for the first time in a long time, they felt like they belonged.

The atmosphere in the palace had grown heavier, their mother the queen was suffering; they could see it. She tried to hide the cuts on her body, the cuts she had inflicted herself, but the boys were familiar with her ways. They could see she was suffering and in pain, both physically and mentally.

Here in the streets they could get away from that, at least for a short time.

Cam moved through the crowd, seeking out his targets. He was short, surrounded by the adults around him; a boy his age was invisible. In this circumstance, that was ideal. He moved quietly, trying his best to remain small and unseen. The celebration around them continued loudly, there were coloured flags above their heads, trumpets sounding, singing, food being served, gypsies that danced and played music. Everyone was distracted, which for Cam was perfect.

Cam had been taught enough to be able to steal in most circumstance, but he still had a lot to learn, as did his brother. He sidled up to several people, looking up at them and around, before slipping his hand into their pockets and taking whatever was there, before moving on.

Along the way he met another, one of his sisters and for many years a member of the guild.

Sammy grinned at him, nodded her head, before moving swiftly on. They were expected to steal a lot in a single day, and if they didn't take what they could, some days the master, the father of the 'family' would refuse them food, and there were only so many hours in a day.

Julius was a strict man many would agree, strict but fair. If he were not harsh as he was, their family would not have survived for this long, especially in times like these.

Cam moved up to a man, watching him closely.

The man was distracted by a group of dancing gypsies. The olive-skinned women were very beautiful, their bodies slender and bellies bare, they swayed their hips when they moved, rolling their shoulders seductively.

Cam's eyes travelled down the man's body and to his open pocket as he watched the women dance. He stared at it for several seconds, before glancing up at the man, then back down to the pocket.

His reached towards it, slipping his hand in.

The man's eyes flashed and he whipped around, hand lashing out and grabbing Cam's wrist tightly. Cam cried out in shock, staring up wide-eyed at the man.

'You little thief' the man snarled through gritted teeth, tightening his hold around Cam's wrist. 'Do you know what they do to those who steal?'

'You're hurting me' Cam sobbed, suddenly very frightened, he began to tremble. 'Please let me go!'

'Roland!' came a female voice. 'Roland!'

The man glanced around, momentarily distracted from Cam then.

Cam began to struggle harder, thinking perhaps this was the best opportunity to escape while the man was distracted. But if anything the man's grip grew even tighter.

‘Roland!’ came the girl’s voice again. Cam gasped as he recognised Sammy coming through the crowd, heading towards them. Having seen her not moments before, she had not wandered too far. ‘He’s one of us’ Sammy gasped at Roland coming to a stop before him. ‘Please let him go.’

Roland turned back to Cam; all anger suddenly gone from his expression.

‘I’m sorry’ Roland said. ‘I didn’t know you were a part of the guild.’

He released Cam suddenly; Cam fell back in the dirt, staring up in surprise at Roland, though no longer feeling afraid.

‘I’m sorry’ Roland said again as Cam fell. He bent down, grabbing Cam under the arms and hauling him to his feet. ‘Are you alright?’

Cam’s eyes never left Roland as he straightened up, grinning down at him.

‘There’ Roland beamed. ‘No harm done.’

‘Cam you idiot’ Sammy hissed, smacking his shoulder hard. ‘We don’t steal from those we know.’

‘I’m sorry I didn’t know’ Cam said hastily in his defence.

‘Come on Sammy’ Roland frowned down to her. ‘There’s no need to scare the poor boy, I think I’ve just scared him enough. Hey’ he said suddenly to Cam. ‘Why don’t you give us a smile?’

Cam grinned suddenly then. He didn’t know why, but he felt suddenly happy.

‘There’ Roland said cheerfully back, grinning too. ‘That’s better.’

An older lady approached them through the crowd. ‘Roland? Who are you talking to?’

The three turned to the older lady as she stepped forward. Aged though still fit, she had red hair tied to side.

‘Who’s that?’ Cam asked.

‘This is my mother’ Roland gleamed putting his arm around her. ‘I love her very much.’

‘And who is this?’ the older lady said, leaning forwards to get a better look at Cam. ‘What a sweet little boy’ she said. ‘You know, I have a daughter about your age.’

‘This is Cam’ Sammy introduced. ‘He’s new and a bit of an idiot, I’m sorry that he tried to steal from you’ she said again to Roland.

‘Think nothing of it’ he waved her away happily.

‘Hello Cam’ the older lady nodded. ‘I’m Dee.’

‘It’s nice to meet you’ Cam nodded back to her.

‘Such a polite boy.’

Cam’s eyes travelled down then as he saw a small hand appear on the skirt of Dee’s dress, and a face appear from around her. The small figure was hiding behind her shyly.

‘Lucy’ Dee said to her daughter. ‘Come on now, don’t be shy. Come out and say hello.’

Lucy stepped out from behind her mother’s skirt, head hung with hands behind her back, she stared at the floor.

Cam blinked as he watched her, his heart skipping slightly. She was cute, with short hair that matched her mother’s but brighter in colour, red like the setting sun. She wore a delicate white dress with flowers all over.

‘She’s really pretty’ Cam spoke aloud, then he went red, realising what he had said.

‘Do you *liiiiike* her?’ Sammy teased, shoving him playfully.

‘N-no’ Cam stammered, ‘I didn’t mean...!’

Dee began to chuckle lightly, as Roland beside her smirked in amusement.

‘Why don’t you children play together?’ Dee suggested, ‘it’s a good day for it.’

‘I’m sorry’ Sammy butt in, ‘but we don’t have time for that. We’ve only got a few hours of light left....and....’ she trailed off.

‘It’s getting harder’ Dee nodded sympathetically, ‘I know. I don’t entirely agree with all this stealing...but...’ she sighed with a sad smile. ‘We must all do what we have to to survive.’

‘Thank you ma’am’ Sammy nodded to her respectfully.

She grabbed Cam by the sleeve and yanked him along. Cam stumbled as he was pulled through the crowd.

‘Keep your mind clear’ she glowered back at him, finally letting him go, ‘we don’t have time for this.’

‘I didn’t do anything!’ Cam shot indignantly back.

‘How much have you got?’ Sammy asked him, sifting through his pockets.

‘Enough’ Cam answered shortly, jerking away from her and turning his back.

‘Fine’ she snapped. ‘Best head back then, just to empty your pockets. We don’t want you getting in trouble again now do we?’

‘Fine’ he grumbled at her resentfully.

The two walked side by side through the crowd, moving swiftly until they came to a narrow alleyway, which was deserted.

‘It feels good to have some space at last’ Sammy said, meandering forwards through the alleyway.

‘Uh-hu.’

‘Come on’ Sammy said pulling the grate in the floor and holding it open for Cam.

Cam crouched and slipped through the hole, creeping through the tunnel. Sammy followed after him.

They emerged sometime later in another part of the city. The streets here were busier than they normally were, because of the holy day, but these streets were quieter than the ones they had left behind.

‘Come on’ Sammy huffed impatiently.

‘Alright!’ Cam snapped back, crawling through the grate and straightening. ‘Jeez you’re moody today.’

They trotted through the alleyway, coming out into the wider streets.

Cam slowed to a stop, staring away.

‘Come on Cam’ Sammy growled.

Cam ignored her, instead he continued to stare.

‘What are you looking at?’ Sammy asked him, returning to his side and following his gaze.

Cam and Sammy stood side by side, staring down one of the alleyways, where they saw three figures.

There was a young woman of about eighteen, and two children, a boy of about nine, and a girl of about seven.

They sat huddled together in the alleyway, their clothes were filthy, and they shivered as they clung to one another. Cam could see that they had been crying, all of them.

He moved towards them.

‘Hey’ he said, ‘why are you out in the streets? Have you lost your family?’

The three raised their heads slowly to Cam, realising he was speaking to them. The younger ones remained silent.

‘Our parents were killed’ the young woman sobbed. ‘We have no home now.’

‘What are your names?’ Cam asked.

‘Tracy’ the young woman replied. ‘This is Jennifer’ she said indicating the girl, ‘and Markus’ she said, nodding to the boy.

‘Come with us’ Cam offered, as Sammy behind her planted her hands on her hip, frowning, not entirely pleased with the way things were going.

‘Where?’ Tracy asked suspiciously, hugging her siblings tighter to her. ‘Who *are* you?’

‘I’m an orphan’ Cam replied, echoing the lie he had told so many times before to those around him. ‘I’m part of a family of orphans now. We all look after each other.’

He extended a hand to her.

‘You can come with us if you like; I will take you to our father, the master of our family. He is the head of our guild. He may accept you into our family, but we all have to pull our weight. Or’ Cam added, seeing her hesitation, ‘you can stay here.’

‘I don’t have anywhere to go’ Tracy told him. ‘I want to look after my brother and sister.’

‘You will’ Cam told her, ‘if you come with us.’

Tracy’s attention drifted towards Sammy, as if looking for reassurance.

‘We will look after you’ Sammy told her, ‘if our father accepts you...if you pull your weight.’

‘Alright’ Tracy relented, feeling that there was no other way. ‘I will come.’

She rose to a stand.

‘Come on’ she whispered to her siblings. ‘We’re going with the children somewhere nice. We’ll be looked after.’

‘I’m scared’ Jennifer moaned, her lip trembling.

‘It’s ok’ Tracy comforted. ‘As long as we stick together, we’ll be fine...’

‘Where are we going?’ Markus whined.

‘Somewhere safe’ Tracy told him, ‘somewhere warm.’

‘We won’t have to sleep in the streets again?’ Jennifer asked miserably.

‘No’ Tracy said hugging her. ‘Not again.’

Cam felt a mournful pang in his heart at that. These last few weeks he had lived amongst the ‘normal’ folk, had been an abrupt awakening as to what life was truly like, and he saw and experienced things he never had before. His life, more so before his father had died, had always been easy, comfortable, and carefree. Even after his father had died, life was relatively easy. He always had food and a soft bed to sleep, a roof over his head, an education, and he lived now in the knowledge that if life became too hard in the streets, he always had a home to return to, as unpleasant as it had become, unlike those around him.

‘What happened to your parents?’ Cam asked the young woman carefully as they went.

‘They were...’ she began, biting her lip, ‘...burned...’ she finished, ‘...as heathens.....because they did not believe....’

Cam faced ahead again, swallowing the lump in his throat.

What a cruel world we live in he thought silently.

‘Die you fucking scum!’

Graham tightened his hold on the metal coil as Soutar before his began to choke, pawing uselessly at his throat, trying to get a grip of the coil and free himself. But it was too deeply embedded into his flesh, and he could not get a hold of it to pull it free.

Suddenly the doors behind burst open and several members of the council on both sides streamed in.

‘Graham!’

Graham glared at them.

‘Let him go!’ one of the council members ordered, and Graham obeyed immediately.

Soutar fell forwards, coughing violently and holding his throat, bleeding where the wire had cut him.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ Lobello demanded, as Quill moved over to Dair who lay on the floor nearby, examining him. But Dair was utterly still.

Quill rose after only a second. ‘He’s dead’ he announced.

‘You will hang for this’ Faisel hissed through gritted teeth, tears of rage and grief in his eyes. Dair had been a close friend of his for years.

Within the group, Brioke looked on silently.

‘This isn’t how it looks!’ Graham called desperately to the others. ‘They tried to kill me first. I was merely protecting myself!’

‘Lies’ Soutar wheezed, lying on his side on the ground and holding his throat.

‘Silence you snake’ Graham spat, kicking him hard in the gut before being pulled away by several of the other members, fighting against them in vain.

Graham was later tried, found guilty and hanged. From then on, the guild members became even more suspicious of the others than they had been before, and were forever looking over their shoulders. Every one of them had suspected foul play, but never before had they seen it so clearly played out.

A short while later and the five ‘children’ were standing in the courtyard before Julius, who sat at one of the tables smoking a pipe.

‘How old are you?’ Julius began.

‘Eighteen’ Tracy replied.

‘And have you been with a man before?’

Tracy ground her teeth, puffing her chest out and balling her fists. ‘I don’t see’ she began furiously, ‘how that’s relevant.’

‘We would be happy to give you a home here’ Julius told her. ‘But we all have to pull our weight. Each of us if the oil that helps the machine run smoothly. If you are not useful, then we get rid of you’ he said. ‘So. Have you been with a man before?’

Tracy grew a deep breath. ‘Yes’ she answered shortly.

‘Good.’ He turned to Kari behind her. ‘Kari’ he said. ‘Could you take her away?’

‘What about my siblings?’ Tracy asked.

‘They stay with me’ Julius answered hastily.

Cam spoke up, as Tracy opened her mouth to protest.

‘It’s ok’ Cam said to her. ‘You can trust him. ‘He’s looked after me all the time I’ve been here. He is a good man.’

Tracy glared at him, though through her anger, Cam could see her fear, and uncertainty. She feared for her siblings, it was clear she cared deeply for them, as Cam did for Luke. But also from her expression Cam could see she feared also for herself.

‘I have a good life here’ Cam pressed. ‘I survive.’

Tracy turned to Kari, who waited patiently nearby with a smile.

‘It’s alright’ Kari beamed encouragingly. ‘I’ll look after you.’

Tracy relented. She bent down, embracing Jenifer and Markus tightly.

‘I’ll come back to you’ she whispered to them. ‘I promise.’

‘Please’ Markus begged. ‘Please don’t leave us.’

‘I have to’ Tracy said. ‘I have to...’

She gave them each a kiss on the cheek, cupping their faces in her hands.

‘I’ll be back’ she said to them as she straightened. ‘Have I ever let you down?’

‘No’ Markus mumbled.

She nodded to them, turning away from them and following Kari out of the room.

‘Now’ Kari began as they went away, ‘what size dress are you?’

Julius diverted his attention back to the remaining children, back to Jennifer and Markus.

‘Right’ he said to them. ‘Have ever you stolen anything before?’

It wasn’t long after, when Luke came back in a panic. Julius listened silently as Luke spoke quickly as to what had happened. When he had finished, Julius bowed his head sombrely, and turned to face the others in the courtyard.

Cam who waited nearby had not heard what Luke had said. Luke, the moment he appeared had run straight to Julius. The other thieves that had returned at the same time as him waited a short distance away.

Julius spoke loudly, addressing the others.

‘I want every member of our family returned here as soon as possible’ he called out to those that remained. ‘Go out now and find who you can and tell them to return home. I need to speak to all of you. There is something I must say.’

The other guild members scattered, and Luke at last came over to talk to Cam.

‘Suzan’s been caught by authority’ he said in a hushed voice to Cam. ‘She’s been taken away by the palace guards and imprisoned.’

‘Oh no’ Cam groaned, feeling a sinking in his heart.

‘What can we do?’

‘I’m afraid we can’t do much ourselves’ Cam replied. ‘We have to wait for Julius to speak and see what he says.’

Luke turned away then, grinding his teeth and staring at the ground.

‘What is it brother?’ Cam asked him.

‘Do you....I mean...’ Luke began. ‘Do you feel guilt about stealing from others?’

‘No.’

‘Maybe you should.’

‘But why?’ Cam agreed. ‘These people only steal because they have to, and we only take from those that have money.’

‘But we could get in trouble for it.’

‘Sometimes it’s worth the risk’ Cam told him.

‘It’s so unfair’ Luke grumbled, ‘and yet...’ he drew a deep breath. ‘Do you ever think...’ Luke went on, ‘what if we could stay here forever and never go home?’

‘Yes’ Cam mumbled back. ‘All the time.’ He tilted his head at Luke then. ‘Do *you* wish that? Do you wish we could stay here and never go back to the palace? Even living through all this danger?’

‘Yes’ Luke mumbled without a pause. ‘At least in this life, I feel safer, despite everything. At least in this life, we have freedom, and more certainty than the life we live in the palace.’

‘Yeah’ Cam nodded. ‘I feel the same.’

‘Then why don’t we stay here?’ Luke glanced up, feeling suddenly excited. ‘Why don’t we live like the others do and never go home again?’

‘Because’ Cam sighed, ‘unfortunately, we are too important. Just think about it for a minute. There is no way they wouldn’t try to look for us. And why would you want to say that now of all times? Look at what’s going on.’

‘I’m sorry I just...’ Luke bit his lip, blinking back the tears from his eyes. ‘I’m not thinking straight, I just said it on a spur of the moment.....I’m sorry...you’re right...’

Cam was about to speak.

‘Luke! Cam!’

They both tensed as their names were called out.

‘Did you hear what I said?’ Julius growled to them. ‘Go out and find your brothers and sisters and hurry, there’s no time to stand and talk.’

The boys scattered instantly then, slipping through one of the many secret passages out of the courtyard and heading into the streets.

That evening a few hours later, the entire family of nearly forty was crammed into the dining hall. The older ‘children’ standing at the head of the hall around Julius, as the young children sat upon and around the tables. It was so cramped, that those that did not fit at the tables sat on the ground between them, while others stood by the walls, some even hung from the beams overhead.

The hall, despite holding so many people, was utterly silent. Not a single breath was heard.

Julius waited for a moment longer, just to make sure everyone was listening, their attention all fixed on him, before speaking.

He rose from his seat, and surveyed the faces before him.

Towards the front of the hall Tracy hugged her siblings Jennifer and Markus to her. Cam and Luke waited silently nearby. Cam glanced nervously to the window where he could see the sky beyond was growing dark.

He swallowed the lump in his throat, hoping against hope that no one back at the palace would notice their absence. But he was here now, and he knew that none were allowed to leave. Especially not now. If he even tried, the master would be furious, would likely punish him on the spot. And his discipline was severe, and at that time he feared Julius, more than he feared anything else.

Julius spoke.

‘I’m sure you all are fully aware of the situation by now’ he droned in a bored tone, he didn’t speak loudly, but his voice echoed clearly in the still hall. ‘The new laws and harsher punishments are causing more and more children to be orphaned, more and more children that we are compelled to take in. We were never meant to be as large a family as we are, and we are collapsing now under our own weight, the more we steal the more we make ourselves obvious, and we have already lost several of our siblings.’ His gaze lingered then upon Alex, whose twin sister had gone missing and was now presumed dead. ‘But’ Julius continued, his voice carrying far to the back of the hall, ‘for every one child we lose, we gain two.....this pattern has been going on for quite some time. From now on, we will no longer be taking any more members. No exceptions. And from now on, we will no longer steal from the streets, it’s now become too risky, we don’t want them to find our nest. That would be the end of us.’

‘What about Suzan?’ the brave boy Anthony spoke up.

‘Forget about her’ Julius told him coldly. ‘She is lost. We risk more by trying to save her.’

‘I care deeply about Suzan’ Kari spoke out, talking over Anthony as he was about to protest, mouth open wide in shock at Julius’ words. ‘I would go out to try to look for her. I cannot simply give up on her.’

‘You do so at your own risk’ Julius said glancing back at her. ‘If you run into trouble, there will be no one coming to rescue you.’

‘I understand’ Kari spoke deeply, bowing her head. ‘I am willing to try to save her if you allow me.’

‘Fine’ Julius said turning away. ‘Just remember that you do so at your own risk.’

‘I need someone to come with me’ Kari went on. ‘Not you’ she said to Anthony as he was about to volunteer. ‘I need someone a bit smaller and faster.’ Her eyes roved across the hall, until they landed on Cam and Luke.

She pondered upon both of them for a moment, before choosing.

‘Cam’ she said. ‘Will you come with here?’

Cam shared a nervous glance with his brother only briefly, before stepping tentatively forwards, feeling very self-aware now that the attention of the entire hall was upon him. He walked to the head of the hall, and ascended the steps to stand beside Kari, gazing up at her with large eyes.

‘There’s a good boy’ she smiled kindly down at him.

‘There is one last job I need to be done’ Julius went on. ‘We need to escape from this city and move to another place, it’s become too dangerous for us here. We will move to another town.’

Cam’s eyes lit up as he heard those words, his heart began to soar.

We can escape the palace after all! He realised. We can begin a new life!

As he glanced over at Luke who stood in the crowd, realising by the expression on his face that Luke was thinking the exact same thing.

‘One last job’ Julius was saying. ‘We need to escape, but we need money to do so. Crake.’ He turned to Crake who stood behind him. ‘I want you to go out on this job.’

‘Yes father’ Crake nodded obediently, standing suddenly tense.

‘The rest of you are to stay here for your own safety until I say otherwise...once we have the means to escape, we will be gone, and never look back. Luke!’ Julius barked.

Luke jumped at his name.

‘You will go with Crake to keep an eye out. Two eyes are better than one.’

Oh no Cam thought, as he watched Luke hurry to the front of the hall, weaving as fast as he could around the bodies, and ascend the steps to go stand beside Crake.

‘Kari’ Julius spoke. ‘You take Cam and try to find Suzan, Crake, hang back and I will tell you the details of my plan, the rest of you, stay here, the elders will bring you food shortly.’

Cam cast one last desperate glance towards Luke as he was led away, and he wondered briefly in his head when he would see him again, fear jolting in him at the thought that he might *not* see him again.

Luke watched him go with wide eyes.

Cam hated being parted from him like this, but he had no choice. The master’s word was final. If you tried to resist him or if you pushed him in the wrong way, especially at a time like this, then he would make you wish you hadn’t.

Kari went to her room to change quickly, while Cam waited for her in the courtyard, the feeling of nervousness growing stronger within him with every passing minute. He scratched at his sweaty palms as he waited, sitting on one of the benches with his head down.

He looked up to the sky again, his stomach tightening as he realised, *we should be sitting at home eating with our mother now.....there is no way she wouldn’t know by now that we are gone...*

Kari returned shortly after. She was dressed in a vivid-deep red dress, with a tight corset to push her chest up, and bare arms and shoulders. Her blonde hair was tied up to expose her neck, and she wore modest but pleasant jewellery. But beneath her dress, hidden under the layers of skirt, she wore heavy boots, perfect for traversing rough terrain if she had to.

She marched up to Cam.

‘Ready?’

He nodded silently to her, unable to speak.

‘Then follow me’ she said, turning and striding away.

They passed through a small doorway leading out of the courtyard, winding through several narrow corridors, before stepping out onto the street. Cam kept close to her heels as she went, like a well trained dog, never falling more than two steps behind.

Interlude start

The figure leant forward upon her elbows, gleaming behind her mask as she watched on the monitor, the young boy and woman heading through the streets.

‘There you are’ she grinned.

Interlude end

It was dark in the streets as they moved along, and Cam kept his head down as he trotted after her, feeling nervous at first, and then shortly after, he began to feel afraid.

Kari paused for a moment, turning to him.

‘When we get there’ she said to him, ‘we mustn’t waste time. Wait for the right moment; then move as quickly as you can. Have you got that?’

‘Yes’ Cam nodded quickly, heart beating faster in his chest.

Kari turned away from him, moving on.

‘She was taken in this part of the city’ Kari mumbled to herself glancing about her. ‘There is only one prison in this area. That is where she must have been taken...’ she pursed her lips then. ‘Security is not exactly tight’ she told him. ‘They would have the keys hanging near the entrance of the place. They should be fairly easy to find...’

‘I can do it’ Cam said, speaking with more conviction than he felt.

She glanced back at Cam, whispering to him.

‘Follow my lead.’

They approached the prisons a short while later, Cam slowing his pace and hanging back instinctively as Kari marched forwards towards the guards that hung lazily about the front of the prisons. Leaning on their weapons with their helmets resting on barrels beside them, they sat about on the benches, muttering amongst themselves. An orange glow radiated from the building behind them, but it was not a gentle one. There was no door to the front of the building, no proper entrance, just a space that opened onto the street. This space was where the guards would sit on rainy days, and was mostly empty, save for a few chairs and a simple desk.

The prison itself was at the back of this space, where dark bars separated the cells.

Glancing at the building, Cam thought of how miserable it looked, how basic and ugly it was and how cold it must be inside.

Poor Suzan Cam thought. Don’t worry. We’re coming for you....we’ll get you out.

The clouds above them were thick, blotting out any light from the moon, and casting the city below it in shadow.

It was damp in the city, the air felt heavy, as if it were about to rain.

Cam hugged the wall, pressing his body close to it, trying to make himself invisible.

Don’t see me. Don’t see me. Don’t see me. He squeezed his eyes tight shut. *I can’t believe this is happening? How did I get into this situation? If mother knew...oh gods...* He began to shudder. *What if I am killed?* He shook his head violently. *No! I mustn’t think of such things!* He glared now at the scene before him, as Kari approached the men boldly. The guards raised their heads up at her.

Concentrate. Cam thought. *I must pick my moment carefully.*

‘Hello boys!’ Kari called to the men strolling up to them, hands placed upon her hips. ‘How do you fancy a bit of fun?’

Cam gritted his teeth, turning his head sharply away, before forcing himself to look back.

He knew this was necessary, he knew Kari, like so many other women in this city, in this world, must do what was needed to survive, like so many other men and children, forced to do terrible things...to degrade themselves...to pretend to enjoy it.

What a cruel world we live in Cam thought, as he watched Kari kiss one of the men, who ran his hands over her body and between her legs.

‘Don’t you have all the fun’ one of the men called moving closer. ‘Give her here!’

So disgusting Cam thought, barely able to hide his expression of revulsion, as his brow furrowed and lips twitched in a snarl. *I will never be like that when I grow up. Never! Not if I live forever.*

Cam hung back, waiting for the right moment. Kari allowed herself to be pushed back upon the bench as the guard bore down on her, lifting her legs up.

Cam crept closer, clinging to the shadows he slipped around the corner. Cam peered around, touching the building where the prisoners were held.

He was close, so very close now. The guards were within an arm's reach, but they all had their backs to him, all their attention was upon Kari. There were four of them.

Cam took a slow and steady breath, bracing himself.

He was just thinking about stepping forward, heart racing at the very thought, when he drew sharply back suddenly, as another guard stepped out from the entrance of the prison.

Dammit that was too close Cam thought as he peered around again from his hiding place. *Five.* He waited for a few seconds, assessing the situation.

All the guards were distracted.

This was his moment...

Cam slipped around the corner and darted into the prison. He was in full view of the guards now if they turned, and his heart beat so hard in his chest it hurt him, and all he could hear was the blood pumping in his ears. He realised with horror that his very life now hung by a thread.

He knew that if they caught him, they would kill him.

Cam glanced quickly back towards the small group of men gathered at the entrance, who were all distracted still. He listened to Kari's moans as he reached for the key on the large ring that hung on a hook on the wall above the table. There was just a single key, a skeleton key that would open all doors here.

Cam climbed as quietly and carefully as he could upon the wooden table to reach the hook, lifting the large ring with the single key up over the hook.

He slipped off the table, glancing back towards the guards, who were laughing now.

Cam stepped lightly, heading further into the small prison and towards the back.

The cells were overcrowded and cramped. Mostly they held hardened looking men, but there were, hidden amongst them, a few women, some younger boys...and.....

'Suzan' Cam hissed, rushing up to her.

She glanced up at him, huddled in the corner of one of the cells as far away from the burley men who shared the space with her as she could. She was shaking violently, and her face was streaked with tears.

She did not seem surprised to see Cam there, and for a moment Cam thought he was invisible to her.

'Suzan' he whispered to her. 'It's me.'

'C-Cam?'

'Hey is that the key?' one of the burley men asked him, moving forwards.

'Keep your voice down' Cam hissed urgently. 'They'll hear you.'

'Are you here to let her out?' another burley man said jabbing a finger towards Suzan who continued to tremble. 'The moment you open that door, we'll all be out of here.'

'I'm only here for her' Cam shot back angrily.

‘Oh yeah?’ another own gleamed cruelly. ‘Hey guards!’ he suddenly called loudly. ‘I think you have a rat problem!’

The guards standing in the entrance turned.

Cam paled instantly.

He had been spotted.

‘Hey!’ one of the guards snapped. ‘You there! Stop!’

Cam turned from them, panicking as he shoved the key into the lock.

One of the guards grabbed him from behind and lifted him, just as Cam turned the key.

He watched in horror as the door was thrown open from the inside, and the burley men charge out.

The guard that held Cam was punched hard in the face by one of the prisoners, and Cam was suddenly dropped as the guard fell.

Cam rolled to his side, staring in wide-eyed shock as the guard had his face bashed in.

Blood flecked Cam’s cheek as he stared in horror, watching as the bones in the guards face cracked and broke, blood and teeth mashed together as the attacking prisoner stomped down on his head again and again.

He whimpered, curling up into a ball and holding his head as the other prisoners leapt over him, attacking the guards with the violence and rage derived from those who were born into a cruel life, and suffered anger, pain and injustice every day since childhood.

The guards without their weapons had been caught by surprise. But they quickly fought back, and were killing the prisoners who were unarmed.

Cam pushed himself up, forcing himself to stand and fighting against the wave of fear, he ran back into the cell, grabbing Suzan roughly by the arm and pulling her up.

‘Come on!’

He held her by the wrist as they ran, jumping over the fallen bodies of the guards and prisoners at their feet. One of the guards called out to them to stop as they sprinted past, but Cam and Suzan only slowed when they were a short distance from the prison, watching as the men still fought behind them.

Cam stared ahead as he panted.

‘Kari?!’

He gasped suddenly as he saw her, lying on the cold stone of the street, with fresh blood blossoming from her navel. Her entire midriff was damp, even with the red dress that she wore, even in the darkness, by the dim light of the lamps that hung from the buildings around them; Cam could see the blood had begun to pool around her.

Cam’s heart constricted in his chest, utterly horrified as he met her eyes.

She blinked.

Oh gods she’s still alive!

Suzan glanced down at her, gasping with hand clapped over her mouth.

‘Mother...?!’

What did she say?!?!

‘You there!’ called a voice from the building above them.

Cam glanced up briefly to see a shadowy silhouette standing on the roof of the prison. His mouth went dry and he struggled to swallow as he saw the vague outline of a crossbow in the man’s hands.

The man raised it.

‘Run!’ Cam screamed, dragging Suzan with him and tearing down the street.

He had never felt terror like this before in his life, save for that day when Auntie was killed. It was the raw primal emotion that existed in only the deepest part of the mind and surfaced, only when faced with certain death.

I'm not going to make it! Cam thought desperately. *I'm not going to make it!*

Suzan stumbled then, drawing suddenly a sharp intake of breath.

‘Come on!’ Cam cried, trying to pull her up and not even looking.

Cam heard a strange noise, at first he didn’t know what it was, until he glanced down at Suzan, and saw the two bolts sticking from her back.

Her grip as she held him weakened, and she fell forwards, landing heavily on the floor.

Cam stared down at her in terror, for several seconds unable to move as his body froze.

His eyes travelled slowly up, back to the roof of the prison, where stood now not one crossbowman, but two.

They were reloading their weapons, and doing so quickly.

Move move move Cam thought frantically, as he watched the silhouettes raise their weapons and take aim.

Oh gods help me! Cam bowed his head, squeezing his eyes tight shut and hunching his shoulders, waiting for the impact. *This is going to hurt....oh gods I'm really going to die...why can't I move!!!*

He threw his head back screaming.

‘Somebody help me!’

He heard the *thwak thwak* sound of the bolts strike a target, but he blinked in confusion, realising that he had not been hit.

And then he looked forwards, perplexed for a moment when he could not see anything at all.

It took him several seconds to realise that someone was standing right in front of him, a tall figure cloaked all in black and hooded.

The figure turned, and Cam’s heart jolted when he recognised the crows mask.

‘That was a close one’ the masked figure spoke in a female voice, throwing down the shield she held, from which protruded two bolts. ‘You’re a lucky boy...or perhaps not.’

‘Auntie?’ Cam uttered.

‘Sorry kid’ the female voice replied. ‘I am not her. She is long dead. Now you’d better hurry. I won’t save you for a second time.’

Cam stared up at her, still unable to move.

‘Go!’ the figure snapped, shoving him back harshly.

Cam stumbled and fell.

His trance broken, he rose again, turning and running away as fast as his legs would carry him. He heard as he went, the guards were beginning to pursue him. Their voices rang in the distance as he tore through the streets. He dared a glance behind, seeing several running after him, moving in a line as if to block his escape if he tried to double back and slip past them.

It was then he suddenly noticed a bell was ringing nearby, the city’s watch bell, to summon guards to a particular area.

Oh god oh god oh god they're going to catch me!

He skidded to a stop then, seeing a row of guards approaching from ahead. He glanced desperately about, searching for escape, no alleyway to escape by, no grate to slip through, the roofs were too high to reach and there was nothing he could climb on to reach them.

In his desperation he turned to the nearest door, a house, from which lights were flickering from inside through the windows. He banged on the door with both his fists, screaming at the top of his lungs.

'GODS SOMEBODY HELP ME LET ME IN!'

He turned to face the street again, back pressed against the door and pushing himself against it, wishing to disappear, wishing the door would swallow him.

He glanced one way, then the other.

The guards slowed to a stop as they surrounded him.

They circled him, glaring at him with cold expression.

Cam saw no mercy in their eyes.

'I can't believe a little kid like you would try to pull a stunt like that' one of the guards said to him. 'Do you have any idea of the tortures you will suffer? I hope it was worth it.'

The door suddenly opened behind him, and Cam fell backwards. He jerked his head around, gasping at the figure that stood over him, holding the door open.

'...Roland?'

'What a staggering coincidence' the masked female said, standing behind the guards. Cam glanced ahead at the sound of her voice. He seemed to be the only one who could see or hear her. 'I promise you it wasn't us' she told him. 'You came here by pure chance...honestly.' And then she was gone.

'Stu' Roland said. Cam was slow to realise that he was talking to him. 'What trouble have you been getting up to?'

Roland knelt before Cam then, lifting him and hugging him tightly.

'I'm so glad you're alright' Roland said to him as Cam blinked in confusion. 'Where have you been?'

'You know this kid?' one of the guards asked him sceptically.

'He's my brother' Roland glared at him.

'You look nothing alike.'

'Half-brother' Roland added, still holding Cam close to him.

As Cam stared over his shoulder inside the house, he could see the figures of Dee and Lucy, sitting at the table, halfway through their meal. There were three other figures at the table Cam did not know. They all stared towards the doorway with their mouths open, and a look of shock upon their faces.

'Is this true?' the guard asked in a grumble, addressing those sitting at the table.

'Of course it is' Dee said rising. 'I know my own son when I see him. Now what do you want?'

The guard didn't answer. Instead his glare returned back to Cam.

It was clear he was still extremely suspicious.

'He needs to be punished for his crime' the guard snarled.

'What crime?' Roland retorted, still holding him.

'He stole the key to the prison and set loose several dangerous men.'

'You let a boy sneak into your prison and steal the key?' Roland said flatly.

‘We could have him hanged for this.’

Cam clutched onto Roland tighter, daring a glance back at the terrifying men.

‘Not without a trial’ Roland countered, rising to his feet. ‘And you would have to explain how you let a *boy* make you all look like fools. You were supposed to be guarding those prisoners. Perhaps it is you who should hang. At the very least you will lose your jobs...*if* you are lucky.’

The guard ground his teeth furiously. He glared down at Cam, who returned his gaze in wide-eyed fear.

‘If I ever see you again...’ the guard snarled at him, but he never finished his sentence. Instead he skulked off, waving at the others to follow.

Roland rose swiftly and closed the door with a snap, turning his attention back onto Cam now; he spoke in a hushed voice.

‘Are you alright?’

Cam stared up at him, feeling numb. He let out a sob, stepping forward and embracing Roland around the middle, hugging him tightly and bawling.

He felt a touch from behind; realising seconds later that it was Dee, recognising her voice.

‘It’s alright Cam. You are safe now.’

The rest of the evening was a blur.

Cam could not clearly remember what had happened. He had been led away from the door, the other members of the family speaking in murmurs around him. He had been taken to another room, the blood washed from his face. Then Dee had led him to a bed.

‘Stay here’ she told him gently. Cam noticed vaguely that there were tears in her eyes. ‘Rest’ she said. ‘You are safe now. We will look after you.’

Cam lay on the bed in the dark room, experiencing the foreign environment around him, everything he saw, the feel of the sheets, and the distant voices coming from downstairs.

No doubt they were talking about *him*.

But he could not sleep. Everything he had seen and now remembered, would haunt him for a very long time. But despite the fear he had suffered, what frightened him most now was something else.

Luke...where are you....? He squeezed his eyes tight shut, hugging the pillow to him. A tear ran from the corner of his eye.

Please....Luke....please be safe.....please.....oh god please don't die....

From outside the window, sitting upon the roof and peering in was a masked figure.

‘No doubt...’ the female voice spoke, ‘you fear for your brother.’ She leant back, holding a knee. ‘I wonder where he is...’

She smiled to the night. There was a break in the clouds above, and for the briefest moment, the moonlight shone down upon the city.

‘It’s beautiful’ she sighed. ‘Oh so beautiful.’

The figure rose to her feet then, moving and walking away. Her footsteps were light on the tiles below her. She reached the edge of the rooftop and jumped, leaping down to the street below.

It was here that she met another figure that looked like her.

‘And who are you?’ she said to the figure, who wore the same mask as she did, the same black cloak and gloves.

‘Isn’t it funny’ the person said, speaking in a male voice, ‘that even amongst ourselves we cannot recognise each other.’

‘Oh’ the woman said on hearing his voice. ‘It’s you...Reuben.’

‘And it’s you’ he said to her. ‘Callista.’

She smiled behind her mask.

‘What are you doing here?’ Reuben asked turning to her fully now.

‘Just taking part a little in the action’ Callista replied. ‘We are all part of this story.’

‘Why do you care so much for the boys?’

‘Don’t lecture me’ Callista waved at him. ‘I know you feel the same, or else why would you be here?’

‘I have things to do’ he told her vaguely, gliding away.

‘As do I’ she replied, moving the opposite way.

The two parted, each heading in different directions.

‘What fun this is going to be’ Callista gleamed, holding her hands together before her as if she were praying.

‘Where are we going?’ Luke huffed as he struggled to keep up with Crake.

‘We need to do one last job’ Crake replied feverishly, glancing back at him. ‘Then we can escape and be gone from this city forever.’

‘Gone...’ Luke mumbled, ‘forever...’

Luke realised they had reached their destination when Crake suddenly stopped. Luke craned his head back up at the house. It was a grand building, slotted between two others not so grand though still ostentatious. The buildings were tall, and imposing. Luke thought them a little scary.

‘This is the richer district’ Crake said distractedly, glancing first one way down the street, and then the other, ensuring the coast was clear.

‘What are we doing here?’ Luke asked him, trying to sound brave.

‘Our guild has many spies’ Crake said, not looking at Luke, but continuing to survey the surroundings.

At last he looked at Luke.

‘We know a lot about this city’ Crake went on, ‘we know all the important people here, who they are, what they do and who they know.’

‘Whose house is this?’ Luke asked tentatively.

Crake glanced distastefully behind him.

‘It’s the home of a high ranking soldier’ he spoke with a sneer. ‘A guard.’

Luke’s heart went cold.

‘We don’t have enough money right now’ Crake said, ‘we need just a little more to guarantee our survival. We need food to feed our family, money to buy a new place to stay.’

‘So we’re going to steal from this home?’ Luke asked. ‘Are we taking a lot?’

‘No’ Crake met his gaze at last. ‘This person is vastly wealthy; we just need one thing, just one...that will be enough. A valuable stone...a weapon...a piece of silver or gold...’

He regarded Luke with a look of scrutiny. ‘I will pass it to you through the window when I find it. Ok?’

‘Yeah’ Luke nodded.

‘Follow after me.’

Crake grabbed onto the bricks of the home, using the cracks between the rock and the pipes and began to climb.

Luke followed after him.

Crake reached the window on the second floor, using a lock pick to open the window. He slipped in, moving swiftly and fluidly.

Outside just below the window, clinging to the rock like a spider, Luke waited.

Crake slipped into the dark room, seeing a study around him, lit only by a single burning lamp hanging from a bracket on the wall.

He crept forwards, eyes roving all around him.

The room was lavish, the wood of the desk, the centrepiece of the office, was made of fine polished oak, above which the chandelier hung, holding many little beads of glass, tiny and beautiful. Everything was clean and orderly in the room; Crake could only imagine the host of servants the owner of the home possessed.

He moved closer to a chest of drawers, seeing many valuable things.

His eyes came to rest upon an ornate clock. It was a beautiful thing, intricately decorated with gold swirls set in blue stone.

He reached up for it, taking it carefully in both hands and lifting it from the shelf.

‘Do you like it?’

Crake’s eyes darted around, seeing before him a tall and muscular figure.

‘Oh shit’ he managed to say, before the figure struck him.

Crake stumbled back, dropping the clock which fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

The guard, the soldier, the owner of the home, grabbed Crake by the front of his shirt, pulling him close and glaring at him.

Crake stared helplessly back and watched, as the guard balled his fist and swung back to strike him again. Crake tried to fight back, tried to fend himself, but he was only young, and the guard that hurt him now was far bigger, stronger, and more savage.

Outside the window Luke heard the thud and the commotion within the room. His heart constricted in his chest as he suddenly realised Crake was in trouble.

‘Luke!’ Crake’s voice howled through the window, suddenly punctuated by a cracking noise and cry of pain. ‘Luke!’ he called again. ‘Get out of here! *RUN!*’

Luke as quickly as he could climbed higher up the building until he reached the roof, trying hard to block out the screams of pain from coming from the office, as Crake was tortured.

Luke paused, leaning over the edge of the roof and trying to see into the window.

‘Crake!’ he sobbed in fear.

‘Run!’ Crake shouted. ‘I’ll hold out for as long as I can!’ he moaned then, and Luke heard the sound of something break.

Luke's eyes shot up as he heard the sound of the bell ringing, the sound that would draw every guard in the area to this place.

He turned and ran across the rooftop, sliding down the tiles until he reached the edge. In his haste he didn't even try to slow, instead simply fell off the edge and onto the floor below, tumbling and rolling. He hit the ground of the street hard, groaning as he forced himself to his feet again.

He glanced around, hearing distant calling, swiftly coming closer.

'He went this way! Hurry! Don't let him escape!'

Luke turned and ran.

Later that night, Crake returned to the guild alone.

His entire family, who had stayed in the hall on Julius' command, were shocked and horrified at the sight of him.

He was barely clinging to life. Bruises covered his whole body and he walked with a hunch, hugging an injury at his stomach. His left eye was swollen shut and he could only just about see from his right eye. Cut lip and broken teeth, his fingers were broken on both hands and he bled from numerous places.

'Julius...' he whispered, crawling forwards up the steps. 'I...failed.....Luke.....gone...'

Julius stared down at him in alarm, his fear only heightened when he heard a crashing noise from beyond the hall, and several male voices shouting from outside the door.

'The guards...' Julius whispered. He turned to Crake angrily now. 'You led them right to us?! We're all going to die now!'

'Not if I can help it!'

The 'children' in the hall all looked up to the figure that had spoken, a figure hanging from the beams above them, and wearing a crow's mask and a hooded black robe.

'I will protect you all.'

'Who are you and why would you help us?' Julius called to the figure, as the noises continued from outside.

'Who I am is none of your concern' the figure spoke in a male voice. 'I help you, because someone I care about, cares a lot for all of you. But...he is not here right now.'

'Who?' Julius called back. 'He? You mean Cam or Luke?'

Behind the mask the figure smiled, but did not say.

'You can escape through that door' the figure pointed. 'I will deal with the rest.'

He leapt down from the beams, landing lightly on the table below him. He walked across it casually, making his way to the door at the front of the hall and opening it, facing the danger outside alone.

Several minutes later he returned to the hall, bearing no signs of the fight he had just taken part in, save for a few minor cuts to his robe.

The hall was empty now, save for two figures, the figure of Crake, who lay at the front of the hall now dead, and Lily, the sick child who sat near his body.

'Poor girl' the male masked figure said standing over her, 'you are sick. Your body cannot take the stress...you will die soon...'

She gazed up at him with large teary eyes, but there was no fear there, only sadness.
'Here' the masked figure said kneeling before her. 'Let me ease your passing.'
She did not resist, nor show fear, as he drew a knife.
He pressed the point to her, and in a swift move drove it through her body, killing her in seconds.
Her death was painless.

The next morning came, it felt like a lifetime, but it came.
Cam lay in bed, his eyes bloodshot red, having not slept a wink the entire night. As the sun slowly began to rise higher in the sky, Cam pulled the sheet over his head, shielding his eyes from the bright light.
The door to the room opened, and Cam lifted his head, glancing over his shoulder.
Lucy stood in the doorway, hanging off the doorknob as she watched him.
'Breakfast will be ready soon' she told him. 'You must be hungry.'
'No' Cam mumbled lying back down. 'I'm not.'
'You have to eat' Lucy told him. 'It's not good to miss your meals.'
Cam didn't answer, lying with his back to her; he stared at the blue sky beyond the window.
'I'll be back a bit later' Lucy mumbled.
Cam listened to the sound of the door closing, then silence.

'How is he doing?' Dee asked her daughter when she had returned downstairs.
'Not good' Lucy shook her head. 'He just...looks so sad.'
'Oh' Dee sighed, her hand going to her heart. 'That poor boy.'
'He must have seen something terrible' Roland lamented. 'He looked so terrified...and the blood...I wonder where it came from.'
'Well it wasn't his own' Bill said. Lucy glanced up at her father.
'We should be thankful' Dee muttered, 'that he is not hurt.'
'Not physically anyway' Bill added.
The sons Daniel and Vincent listened silently from the table where they sat.
'We should keep a very close eye on him' Bill said, 'and give him anything he needs.'
'You're right' Dee nodded. 'Lucy. Would you mind going to check on him again a bit later?'
'Yes mother' Lucy nodded obediently. 'I will.'
About ten minutes or so later, when Cam had still not arrived downstairs, Dee sent Lucy to his room.
Lucy returned seconds later, all flustered.
'He's gone!' she panted to her mother. 'Cam is gone! I think he escaped through the window!'
'What?' Dee gasped in shock. 'But why would he...?'
'We have to go find him' Roland spoke up.
'Wait' Dee said back to him, gathering her thoughts. 'Wait. I know where he must have gone' Dee said rising quickly. 'Daniel' she said to her son, 'you come with me. Just in case. Vincent' she said to the other. 'Keep an eye on things here.'
'Mama' Lucy whined uncertainly. 'Where are you going?'

'It's dangerous for him out there' Dee replied, grabbing her shawl and throwing it around her shoulders. 'I'm going to bring him back.'

She marched out the door without further explanation, followed by her son Daniel.

She moved swiftly through the city, never slowing her pace, knowing exactly where to go, this path was familiar to her.

She came to the den, the home of the guild. Their base.

She drifted through the courtyard, stepping over the dead bodies of the guards around her. They filled the courtyard, body parts scattered and thrown about, blood and gore was everywhere.

Whatever had killed them, whatever had happened, it had been a slaughter.

There was blood on nearly every surface.

Dee tried hard to ignore all of this, heading towards the small door which led into the hall where normally the guild members would eat.

Here she found Cam, kneeling and crying over the dead bodies of Crake and Lily.

Dee moved closer, followed by Daniel a step behind.

She came up behind him, reaching forward tentatively and touching his shoulder.

Cam turned, seeming not to have heard her approach. His eyes were pleading, mirroring his pain and grief.

Dee knelt before him and Cam threw himself into her arms, hugging her tightly and crying.

Dee carried him back to her home, and Cam slept now in her arms, feeling utterly exhausted.

When she reached her home again, she lay him back in bed, and Cam was still.

'I'm going out again' Dee said to her family.

'Where are you going?' her husband Bill asked.

'I'm not going far' Dee told him. 'Don't worry, I won't be long.'

'Are you sure it's safe out there?' he mumbled.

She glanced back at him with a smile. 'I'll be fine' she said with confidence.

When Cam next woke, Dee made him take a bath. She offered him the clothes she had bought just for him, and made him change.

Cam sat at the dinner table when food was being served, clean and wearing the new clothes given to him, he waited for the food to be brought to him.

'When was the last time you ate?' Dee asked him, piling his plate with food.

'I...' Cam mumbled, 'I don't really remember...'

She brought the plate forwards, placing it upon the table before him. She leant down, kissing his cheek. Cam blinked at this, feeling a strange flutter in his heart at the sign of affection.

'Eat' she told him, stroking his hair back softly. 'Please.'

Cam picked up his fork, and began to eat slowly, at the same time crying silent tears, as the emotions of receiving such kindness swelled within him, mingled with the fear.

Where is Luke...?

'It's good' Cam mumbled.

'I'm glad you like it' Dee beamed at him, taking her seat at the table opposite him. 'Eat as much as you want.'

Cam glanced up at the family around him.

There were the parents, Dee and Bill, and their four children. Three boys, Roland, Daniel and Vincent, and their youngest child, their daughter Lucy, who looked to be about the same age as Cam.

Cam bowed his head again, wishing to remain unnoticed as he continued to eat.

Is this what it's like to be a part of a normal family? He wondered, thinking of how Dee seemed to really care for him, as if he were her own child, even though she didn't really know him. He thought of how she had offered to let him stay here in her home, had given him a bed and bought new clothes just for him, how she worried about him, and told him to eat.

He hadn't experience anything like this before...not since....

Auntie...

Cam chewed slowly, blinking back the tears in his eyes and trying to stop any more from falling.

'It's good...' he mumbled quietly again, his voice shaking.

The family of six all glanced up at him, watching him silently.

'I'm glad you like it' Dee answered quietly back.

'I've never had a normal life' Cam mumbled to his knees after dinner had ended. 'I wish...I wish I had been born into another life...to a different mother...one who actually loves me.'

I wonder what she's doing and thinking now Cam thought glumly. *I bet she's looking for us...I bet she's furious...*

'What do you mean?' Lucy asked him as she sat nearby; they were both in the small enclosed courtyard at the back of the house.

She had been given the job by her parents to watch over Cam for his safety. To make sure he was alright, and didn't try to run off again.

'I thought you were an orphan' she said to him, 'and that your parents had died.'

'No' Cam said glumly. 'I lied.'

She watched him curiously then, waiting to hear what he would say next, and what he said next, shocked her.

'I am not who you think I am' Cam told her, speaking firmly now. He rose to his feet, turning to face her head on, his expression hard as if set in stone. 'My name is Cam' he said. 'I am the prince of this kingdom. My brother Luke is the prince. My father the king is dead, my mother the queen lives, and my home, is the palace.'

Lucy's eyes widened, her hands clapped to her mouth, struggling to comprehend what he had just told her.

'A...prince...?' she uttered.

Cam turned away from her, feeling a sudden and strong drive of determination, he began to mutter.

'I must return home' he mumbled to himself. 'If anyone can find Luke...it's mother...'

He glanced towards Lucy, before turning and darting away, leaping upon several boxes.

Lucy ran after him, seeing he intended to use the stacked boxes to climb upon the rooftop and escape.

'No!' she cried, setting after him and grabbing him by the arm. 'You cannot go!'

'You have to let me go' Cam said calmly to her.

‘I was told to look after you’ Lucy shouted at him, tightening her grip. ‘Mama will be furious if...’

‘Lucy...’ Cam uttered, moving closer as he addressed her. Though she still did not let him go. ‘My brother needs me’ he told her. ‘I *have* to find him.’

‘No’ Lucy called desperately, ‘you will put yourself in danger. You could get hurt...you could die!’

‘Please let me go’ Cam said, speaking calmly to her, his body relaxed. ‘Please. My brother needs me.’

Lucy hesitated, seeing the tears in his eyes.

‘I promise I will be safe’ he said. ‘I promise I will see you again.’

Cam leant forward, and kissed her on the cheek.

Lucy blushed suddenly, quickly letting go of him.

‘Thank you’ Cam whispered, before turning and darting away, climbing swiftly and smoothly over the stacked boxes, over the rooftops and away.

Cam found the guard he was looking for without too much effort, the one that had threatened him the night he had been pursued by the guards after breaking into the prison.

He grabbed a heavy rock from nearby and threw it as hard as he could against the guard’s head.

‘You!’ the guard snarled, utterly livid. ‘You little bastard!’

‘Hey fat head!’ Cam called back. ‘Were you looking for me?’

The guard stormed up to him, lifting him by the front of his shirt.

‘You’ll pay for that’ he growled.

Cam did not resist as the guard drew his fist back, then everything went black.

He came too in a new place, pushing himself up gingerly, and finding himself in a prison cell, one larger and darker than the one he had visited before.

It took only a few moments for him to realise that he was underground.

The guard came to him a short while later.

‘You’re finally awake then are you?’ he sneered at Cam.

Cam only glared silently back, his face still throbbing painfully where the man had hit him.

Cam was in a cell on his own. There was no one else around him, save for the three guards that stood before him now.

The guard that had spoken grabbed him, throwing him hard against the wall, kicking and punching him.

‘You think you’re so clever?!’ the guard howled at him, kicking him again.

Cam was curled up in a ball on the floor, shielding his head from the blows.

The guard stepped back after a time. Cam thought he would stop, but he came at him one last time, driving his metal-tipped boot hard into his gut one last time, before stepping away again.

‘I was hoping.....Luke might be here’ Cam groaned, rising slowly and hugging himself, forcing himself to stand even through all the pain. ‘I am willing to return home if it’s the only way I can find him...but only if I had to.....only if I had to...’

Cam rose to his feet, wiping the blood from his mouth as he did, standing tall and without fear, ignoring the aches in his body.

‘My name is Cam’ he said loudly. ‘I am the missing prince.’

The guard that had beaten him, instantly paled.

A short while later, the guard that had beaten him was dead, and Cam was returned to the palace.

He glared at his mother coolly. She was livid.

Outside the capital, many miles away, a troupe was travelling from the city, heading to places new. The guild, having escaped successfully, was in search of a new home.

The road they walked now was a busy one, but the large troupe, having moved quickly at first, had now slowed their pace as they walked on foot, they were nearly fifty in number.

They had all survived, save for Crake and Lily. Even Luke was among them, having found them as they made their way out of the city. He walked amongst them now, feeling ravenous, with his feet in agony. But he trudged on, along with everyone else, enduring his pain in silence.

‘Hey Luke!’

He stopped, turning towards the figure that had spoken, feeling only mild surprise, though being too exhausted to show it.

‘Auntie?’ he mumbled.

The female masked figure chuckled as she stood by him. ‘No’ she smiled. ‘I am not her.’

‘Oh’ Luke mumbled, turning away and continuing to walk.

‘You are heading towards an uncertain future’ the masked figure told him, moving to keep up with him and ignoring the strange glances she was being given by the figures that walked with them. ‘Who knows where you will end up or what will happen.’

Luke ignored her.

‘If you return to the palace’ the figure suggested, ‘you would be protected.’

‘I will *never* go back to the palace’ Luke snapped, rounding on her.

‘Oh really?’ the masked figure replied smugly, stopping as he did. ‘Not even if it meant seeing your brother again?’

Luke’s eyes widened then, and he held his breath.

‘Your brother has willingly returned to the palace in order to find you, believing the queen will eventually find you and bring you home. He is there now’ she breathed, ‘*waiting...for you...*’

Without another pause, Luke turned and ran.

The figure watched him go with a smile. But before she followed him, she turned back to the troupe, seeking out the one named Julius.

‘I have a gift for you’ she said to him, bringing forth an item hidden beneath her robes.

She pulled the cloth back, revealing a beautiful and ornate clock, intricately decorated with gold swirls set in blue stone. The clock that Crake had tried to steal.

Julius’ eyes grew wide at the sight of it. ‘That could feed all of us for months!’

‘It’s yours’ the masked female figure said to him, ‘take it.’

Luke ran without pause until he reached the city again, ignoring the figures he passed on the road as he went. Eventually he slowed to a jog; the stitch in his side became unbearable.

He paused after a time, glancing back and seeing the masked figure standing behind him a distance away, realising she was following him.

Luke faced ahead again, and continued his slow jog, retracing his steps, along the many miles all the way back to the city.

When he reached the gates, he found them shut.

‘Let me in!’ he ordered, grabbing the great bars with his small hands.

‘Piss off’ the nearest guard snapped at him. ‘The gates are shut on order of the queen. We don’t let in street urchins.’

‘I’m the missing prince Luke!’ he cried. ‘Let me in’ he commanded. ‘Take me to the palace!’

Not long after that, Luke was being led through the palace, struggling to keep up with the soldier’s swift march.

He was taken to the higher levels, where his mother the queen and several council members were waiting for him.

Miranda frowned with displeasure down at him, but Luke could see relief there also. He must have been gone for several days. He couldn’t even remember how long.

‘Your brother has been worried about you’ his mother said to him curtly.

Luke stared up at her silently. She led him through the palace by way of the many corridors and stairs and back to his bedroom. She opened the door for him.

Cam glanced up, his expression splitting into a wide grin at the sight of his brother.

‘Luke!’

‘Cam!’

He rose from the bed, running to Luke and embracing him tightly, fighting back his sobs.

‘Thank the gods you’re safe’ Cam cried into his shoulder. ‘I was scared you might be dead.’

‘I was scared of the same thing...’

They broke apart, staring into each other’s faces. Both were crying.

Their mother stepped beside them.

‘I can’t even begin to image what would drive you to do such an unbelievably foolish thing and leave the palace like that’ she said folding her arms, ‘but from now on; you are to remain in this palace. The gates to the gardens will be locked...that *tree* you climbed will be chopped down, and all the windows and doors in this palace will be kept sealed and guarded *at all times*. Do you understand?’

The boys hesitated.

‘Do I make myself clear?!’

‘Yes mother’ the twins echoed at that.

‘You are never to leave this palace again’ she told them. ‘Ever again.’

Cam’s heart began to sink in his chest, and his gaze drifted then towards the council who stood near the doorway.

His eyes met with Brioke’s, the older council member glaring back at him.

Cam felt an icy chill run through his body.

Chapter Seven

The queen strode down the corridor, deep in thought.

Things had seemed to have returned to normal, or as normal as things were nowadays. The past few days in which her sons had both been missing had been difficult, and she had feared for their lives, as well as her own.

Without the young princes, she was just a loose piece. Miranda frowned to herself. Well...if she lost her sons, she would be even more of a loose piece than she was now. Now she was only a hindrance to the council, and did everything she could (what little she could) to stand against them.

She had expected an attempt on her life; the possibility had always simmered at the back of her mind. Her handmaiden, whose job had been to taste all her food before she ate it, had been poisoned and was now dead. Miranda knew it would be her turn soon. But even so, when it came, it caught her completely off guard. No one could guess when death would pay them a visit.

She rounded the corner and had no time to react or even register what was going on. The instant she rounded the corner, a figure standing there punched her hard in the stomach, doubling her over. She was grabbed by her throat and thrown on her back before she even realised that she was being attacked. She tensed quickly, drawing a silent breath between her teeth and leaning back away from the knife held to her throat.

‘Make a noise and you're dead.’

Miranda stared in horror up at the man before her, her mind a frantic whirl of thought and emotion, though nothing yet was making sense.

The man's face was hidden, and she did not recognise his voice.

He grabbed her by the arm, hauling her to her feet. He began to drag her down the corridor.

‘Where are you taking me?’ she demanded.

‘Shut it!’ He snapped viciously back at her, without turning or slowing down.

He held her tightly with his arm around her throat, moving too quickly for her, and she stumbled several times as she was pulled.

Miranda glanced fearfully around as the man that held her slowed to a stop. She saw a rope tied to a banister of the stairs, thrown high up and over the chain of a chandelier and hanging back down again. The end of the rope was tied in a loop, like the kind one would wear around their neck before they were hung.

Miranda saw as the man bent to pick up the loop at the end of the rope, lifting it as if about to place it around her neck.

She acted without much thought, her mind set only on defending herself.

She threw her head back sharply, smacking him hard in the face.

The man's grip on her loosened and she took this chance to flee from him, only managing a few steps, before he caught her again. He began to attack her, always striking her on the body, where any injuries could not be seen beneath her clothes.

She screamed then, her voice cut short when the assassin clamped his hand over her mouth.

She was dragged backwards again, back towards the balcony, and the rope was tied around her neck.

She began to scream obscenities at him. The assassin sharply yanked the rope tighter around her throat, silencing her.

Miranda gasped painfully as he lifted her over his shoulder, preparing to throw her over the balcony.

But he froze suddenly. Miranda realising this, stopped struggling.

She looked around, towards the direction the assassin was facing.

Her heart skipped a beat as she saw both her sons, standing side by side and watching with horror, disbelief and confusion.

The assassin relaxed his grip on her, lowering the queen to the floor.

He turned and walked away as if nothing has happened, slipping around the corner and out of sight, never to return.

Miranda let out a heavy breath, pulling the rope off her as quickly as she could and leaning back against the wall.

A suicide Miranda thought frantically. *He wanted it to look like a suicide.*

She lifted a hand, caressing her own neck where the rope had hurt her.

'What's happening?' Cam spoke up, his voice breaking as he began to tremble in fear. '...Mother?'

'We have to let the council know about this' Luke said desperately. 'They'll protect us.'

'Don't you understand?' their mother hissed at him straightening and turning to face them.

'The council are the ones who have done this...though....I doubt I'll ever learn exactly which of the snakes it was.....no.....' she spoke mildly turning away. 'We're on our own.'

Luke and Cam shared a fearful glance.

'Boys' Miranda said facing them again. 'We're living in dangerous times. We have to protect ourselves. Remember this day, and never let your guard down.'

Cam stared levelly; his gaze travelled right through his mother.

Let my guard down? Cam thought. *It's already too late for me.*

'I want you boys to stay with me until...' she pursed her lips, becoming distracted suddenly.

'I need to speak to someone...'

The next day, the queen summoned her children to her bedroom.

They stood side by side, watching the strange figure that stood beside their mother with uncertainty.

'Boys' the queen introduced, indicating the figure standing beside her. 'This is Tim. He will be helping to protect us, in these difficult times. I want you to trust him.'

Cam and Luke stared at the man.

He was very average. Average height, not tall but not short either. Neither handsome nor ugly, nothing about his appearance that was distinguishing, his eyes and hair were brown and he dressed in dull clothes.

He would blend into a crowd perfectly. For that matter, he would blend well into a wall, or a forest, or likely any environment you put him in.

‘Tim?’ Cam repeated uncertainly. ‘Is that his real name?’

‘There are few people now we can really trust’ Miranda continued as if she hadn’t heard Cam. ‘Almost everyone out there either wants to hurt or use us or get rid of us altogether. I know you boys trust each other, but even if you don’t trust me, you should trust Tim’ she said turning to him. ‘I want you to trust him with your lives. He will keep you alive...if nothing else...’ she fell silent for a moment. ‘Stay alive’ she said to her boys. ‘When you come of age’ she said to them, ‘you will hold a very strong position of power.....*don’t* let them control you.’

She turned to Cam then, who was staring at the ground, trembling slightly, though he did not speak.

‘Cam?’ she said. ‘Are you alright?’

‘Yeah’ Cam mumbled to the floor avoiding her gaze. ‘I’m fine.’

It was then that Luke began to cry.

Without warning, Miranda slapped him hard.

‘Stop crying!’

Cam tensed, immediately hugging Luke and shielding him from their mother. ‘Please don’t!’ he begged her. When Miranda stepped back, Cam turned to Luke, whispering into his ear. ‘We have to stay strong. It’s what father would have wanted.’

Luke nodded silently, furiously brushing away his tears with the back of his hand and straightening up, his cheek red and burning where his mother had hit him.

Shortly after that, Miranda ordered them to leave, wishing for them to be away from her.

‘Are my boys safe?’ Miranda asked Tim when they were alone.

‘I should think so’ Tim replied in a quiet voice. ‘You are the only one who is in any real danger’ he spoke to the queen, ‘it would look far too suspicious if anything bad happened to the boys, and besides’ he paused, ‘they would be very easy to control if the opportunity arose.’

Miranda didn’t answer. She simply stared off into nothingness, her eyes unfocused.

Tim spoke again.

‘Just think about this’ he glanced to Miranda, ‘your husband, whom you loved so dearly with all your heart, or at least that’s what the people think, dies suddenly, when he could have lived many more years. His poor wife, left all alone in the world, so heartbroken...can no longer take the grief...’

‘And commits suicide’ Miranda finished quietly. ‘It’s perfect.’

‘As long as you are never alone’ Tim said to her, ‘you should be safe.’

‘Should be’ Miranda raised an eyebrow, tensing slightly. ‘I suppose that’s the best I can hope for in these times.’

The next evening, the screams began.

Cam and Luke woke abruptly, hearts pounding in their chests. Cam glanced at Luke who sat up in his own bed, breathing fast.

‘Cam?’ Luke trembled fearfully.

Cam turned away from him, moving towards the window by his bed.

He leaned forwards tentatively, hands rested on the sill, he peered outside.

He saw in the courtyard just beyond the garden, a host of men, holy men wearing hooded robes. They stood in a circle around a burning pyre, to which was tied a man.

Cam didn’t hear what Luke was speaking behind him; his brother’s voice was a distant mumble; sounding as if he were speaking underwater. Cam stared wide eyed unblinking down at the courtyard, his trance only broken when the door to their room slammed open, signalling the appearance of their mother.

She spoke to Cam, ordering him to get away from the window. When he didn’t listen, she grabbed him, pulling him back with a hand over his eyes.

The next morning, Miranda was furious.

The boys could hear her screaming at the council members, their response to the queen, and their explanation for what had happened the night before, was that the man was a heretic, and needed to be made an example of. Though the boys didn’t know it, the council members were slowly gaining more power, and using fear to do so.

‘Things are changing for the worse’ Cam said in a distant voice, standing at the window and staring down at the charred body of the man still smoking in the courtyard beside the garden.

‘We have to be strong’ Cam told his brother.

Luke began to cry then, covering his face with his hands and sobbing.

‘I miss father’ he whispered. ‘I miss him so much. He kept us safe...nothing like this happened when he was alive.’

Cam turned to him.

‘Why did he have to die...? It isn’t fair...’

‘Listen to me Luke’ Cam said, grasping his shoulders and shaking him firmly, ‘we have to be strong. Like the heroes in the stories he used to read us. When bad things happen to good people, they fight to see their way through.’

Luke stared through teary eyes back at his brother, blinking miserably.

‘We have to be strong’ Cam said to Luke, tears brimming in his own eyes, ‘for ourselves...for each other.....for father.....’

Luke bit his lip hard, trying to control himself. His lip began to bleed.

‘I will grow to be king one day’ Cam told him, ‘and when I do I will make things better. But for now, I will do what I can to protect you.’

And it was true. By keeping his silence to what he had seen the day Auntie had been murdered, and his encounters with Brioke, he was protecting his brother by keeping him blind.

‘There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you Luke’ Cam whispered to him. ‘...Nothing.....’

The next time their mother appeared to them, she pulled them away from the window again.

Shortly after that, every single window in the palace was replaced with warped glass, so that the sun could shine in, but nothing could be seen in or out. And every door in the palace, even those leading to balconies were locked. Only a few of the guards held the key.

The outside world was completely cut off to the twins; they could not even glimpse it from a distance anywhere in the palace.

Save for one place that had been missed.

A single door in one of the higher levels in the palace, leading up a spiral staircase and to the top of a tower, from which the world outside could be seen.

The twins would sit here often side by side in silence, watching on one side the city, their home, where the lights in the streets and buildings would twinkle at nights. On the other side the beach, which was barren and dark, stretched far into the horizon.

It was beautiful here, peaceful and tranquil and *theirs*.

It was perfect, save for one thing.

From here they could hear the screams, as more men and women were burned in the courtyards and streets below them.

They grew up very quickly after that.

First the gates had been shut so they couldn't leave the palace grounds. Then after the incident in the streets in which Cam and Luke had gone missing for several days, all the doors and windows in the palace itself were locked so they couldn't get out of the building. Then finally, after the burnings, the windows themselves were made so that none could see in or out, but the sun could still shine through.

But there was one place the boys could still see the outside world. There was one place that had been forgotten about, a door leading to a tower on one of the palace's higher levels, which led up a spiral staircase and to an open balcony where the elements could be experienced in their full.

'I fear some days the suffering will never end' Cam mumbled, speaking to his brother who sat beside him, balanced precariously on the balcony wall with his feet hanging over the drop below.

'I know' Luke replied quietly. 'I still...can't believe this is happening....I still can't believe how much things have changed.'

'It will be alright' Cam replied confidently, turning to his brother. 'As long as we have each other, everything will be ok in the end.'

Luke smiled weakly at his twin.

The two looked away then, towards the setting sun

Chapter Eight

Seven years later

Twins aged fourteen

Bella Rose bit her lip, her body trembled. Her family waited expectantly around her. Her mother and father, whom loved her so much, her dear little sister, who meant the world to her, but they did not understand, they could never understand.

‘Where is he?’ Bella shrieked desperately, clutching at her chest, flinching as every heartbeat caused her pain. ‘I *have* to know.’

‘But what about us?’ her dear little sister Sonia pleaded. ‘We’re your family...if you leave us...we’ll never see you again...’

‘But...’ Bella whimpered, hunching her shoulders and hugging herself, her luscious bosoms pushed up by the tight corset she wore, her shoulders were bare. ‘It’s true love.’

‘But don’t you love us?’ Sonia pleaded.

‘I’m sorry’ Bella whispered. ‘I choose him.’

And then she ran, fleeing from her home in the dead of night, her red dress trailing after her, the thin veil of the fabric was light and transparent.

She found him exactly where she knew he would be. She had caught him just in the nick of time. He was a prince, about to leave on a dangerous journey to prove his love to her. He would be travelling with a troupe of gypsies. They all turned towards her as she called out his name.

‘Rafael!’

He wheeled around, eyes growing large in disbelief.

He caught her in his arms as she fell into him, her long hair falling around them in slow motion.

‘Bella! What are you doing here?’

She lifted her head, gazing adorably up at him, eyes shimmering.

‘I had to see you’ she whispered, ‘...just one last time.’

‘I love you Bella’ Rafael breathed, beginning to sparkle.

Roses suddenly appeared in the air around them, their petals swirling around in a gentle breeze.

‘Oh Rafael...I’m melting...’ she moaned, sinking into his arms.

‘I’ll never let you go’ Rafael said, leaning over her, his lips hovering over hers for a kiss.

‘No, we can’t’ Bella said turning away. ‘The stars are watching...’

‘I’d die for you!’ Rafael spoke suddenly sharply, grabbing her and pulling her sharply towards him.

‘Oh Rafael....Rafael...’

She blushed as she raised her head towards him, as Rafael began to kiss her.

‘Cam!’

Cam glanced up.

‘Cam I know you’re in there! Open the door.’

Cam snapped the book shut, turning with a grimace towards the door of the library.

‘Go away Luke!’ he hollered back. ‘I don’t want to see you.’

‘I don’t believe that for a second’ Luke called back, his voice muffled through the door. ‘Let me in!’

‘No.’

‘LET ME IN!’

‘NO!’

There was a brief silence.

‘I’m going to give you one last chance to let me in!’ Luke called.

‘Piss off!’

‘Fine’ came Luke’s muffled voice, ‘if you won’t let me in’ he continued as if he hadn’t heard Cam, ‘then I will let myself in.’

‘Yeah’ Cam scoffed under his breath, turning back to his book. ‘Good luck.’

There was the sound of receding footsteps, then silence.

Cam’s eyes began to skim over the pages as he continued with his story. He was a fast reader he had found, and he managed to read a book a day, sometimes two, on a good day. When he had been younger, he had enjoyed books, but not to the same extent as he did now. Now, he obsessed over them. Now, all he would ever do in his spare time was read. Now, it was all he had.

The books he would pick up, he quickly became lost in their pages, so entranced, his mind a whirl, his imagination vast. The words on the pages would paint the most vivid and beautiful pictures in his head, the worlds he learnt of, the lives of the people within them. He felt...at times...as if he could feel their very heartbeats.

Cam was just slipping into his trance as he continued to read; when he was suddenly jerked back from it and back to reality.

It was only a small noise that he heard, but to Cam it was overbearing.

Cam tilted his head curiously, narrowing his eyes.

The noise happened again, and Cam realised suddenly what it sounded like.

It was the sound of something being unscrewed, something in close vicinity to the door.

Cam furrowed his brow in annoyance, and turned his head very slowly towards the door.

Cam closed the book again and put it down. He slid off the edge of the smooth polished wooden table on which he sat, rising to stand.

The library which had become his favourite place was a large room, with a high ceiling and lots of open space between the tall dark wooden shelves which were filled with thousands of books. It was bright inside the library, but the windows, like all of the other windows in the palace, had been replaced with warped glass. The sun could shine in, but nothing could be seen through the glass, looking inside, or out. It had been this way since that day, since the first burning. Even after all these years. Some things had not changed. Seven years had passed, and neither of the young princes had been allowed to leave the palace, not once in all that time.

They could not see out of the windows of their home, but on some nights, they could still hear the screams, as heretics were tied to stakes and burned, on the orders of the same people

who cared for the young princes. The right hands and the left hands of the king, the council that now cared for the throne, until Cam came of age.

The screams at first had been terrifying. Now to the princes they were as normal as the sound of the wind blowing, or the heavy rain patting against the windows in winter and on dark days.

The brothers hardly registered these sounds anymore.

Cam drifted closer to the door, doing so slowly, reluctantly. His footsteps echoed on the smooth floor in the library. As he drew closer to the door, he passed a statue of a boy, a life-sized statue of the god Filis, a child of about twelve, with six wings, long flowing hair and upwards pointing horns.

Cam had always liked this statue, the expression on the boys face as he smiled with his eyes closed, was one of peace and tranquillity. At times, Cam would simply stand before it. Staring.

‘Luke?’ Cam spoke experimentally as he approached the door. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I told you’ Luke replied with surety in a muffled voice. ‘I’m coming in, even if you won’t let me.’

Cam turned on his heel and strode away.

Luke was just unwinding the last screw in the hinge, when the door fell flat.

He stepped into the library, glancing all around him. But there was no sign of his brother.

It was then that Luke noticed with a disappointed sigh, the hatch left open in the wall. Before the room was a library, it had been a cleaning room, and dirty clothes had been put through the hatch to slide down the chute to the floor below.

Perhaps this was one of the reasons that Cam chose this room, because he could escape if needed, because he could not be trapped here.

Luke turned from the room miserably, heading back out to the corridor. He would never find Cam now, he would have to go a long way around to get to the floor below, and in that time, his brother could be anywhere.

A floor below, Cam was striding down the corridor, taking with him the book he had been reading, *Vanity’s Night*. He sought now to find a new place to hide, a new place that was his and his alone. His secret.

He slipped away, like a ghost. His presence was just as much. He would hardly interact with those around him anymore, not even his brother.

Instead he would just float around, from one place to the next, always seeking solitude, always seeking to be alone.

Always hiding.

He came to the door that led to the tower, the tower which was the last place the princes could still see the outside world.

It had remained a secret all this time.

Cam trudged up the spiral staircase, coming at last to the balcony at the top of the tower. Here he sat and watched the sun set, resting upon the wall with his feet dangling over the drop, the book resting on his lap.

The golden sun cast its gentle glow over the city to one side, the palace garden below him, and the open land to the other side, the open land where he and his brother used to play with

Auntie. That stranger. The princes had come to love her like a mother, and felt closer to her than they ever had their own, and she in turn had loved them.

But...

Even so, they had known almost nothing about her.

She had become only a distant memory to Luke, but to Cam, he had forgotten her altogether. But he still suffered nightmares. Not the ones he had of her death, and the masked figure that had threatened him, but ones far worse.

His life had been hard before Auntie's death, now like the dreams he suffered at night, his waking moments were more painful.

He watched as the tip of the sun dipped below the horizon, its last rays of light bleeding into the sky in a crimson smear over the land. It was so tranquil, so beautiful.

The houses in the city were dark; lights from the windows dotted the scene, keeping back the total blackness. The beach and open plains and forests on the other side however, were already fading from sight.

Cam gave a weary sigh, putting his head in his hands. The book on his lap stayed where it was. It was too dark to read now anyway, he would have to read by candlelight, or wait until morning.

His thoughts briefly drifted to his brother then, though he couldn't help himself. He tried his best to put him out of his mind, but from time to time, it would catch up with him.

Luke was sure to find him here. Both brothers came here at times, it was the only place they could feel the wind, the warmth of the sun, the chill of the snow in winter. It was their favourite place. If one wanted to find the others, the best place was here.

Cam lifted his head, blinking slowly, lowering his hands to rest on the book on his lap. He allowed himself to think of his brother, if not for a short time.

The distance between them had been growing ever wider. With every passing year, Cam tried harder to push Luke further and further away, he thought that Luke might eventually give up on him and move on. But he never had. Not yet anyway.

Cam stayed where he was until all he could see were the lights from the windows in the city, and the twinkle of the stars overhead.

He swung his legs back over the wall, clutching his book in one hand and coming to stand.

He made his way slowly back down the spiral stairs, opening the door carefully when he reached the bottom, and glancing both ways down the corridor to make sure no one was there.

The palace was empty now.

Cam walked away.

But there was one figure who watched him as he went. Luke saw him move away, walking with his back to him. He stepped out from around the corner to see him clearly, but something held him back. He didn't speak, or make himself known, but simply stood there watching his brother mournfully. His lips turned downwards, his eyes hollow and his expression of despair.

Luke turned and walked in the other direction.

Cam went to his bedroom. He no longer shared a room with Luke, as the princes had grown older, a decision had been made by others that it was best to separate them. *Only children*

shared rooms they were told, and a maturing prince needed his own space. Cam thought for a moment. In a few more years, when he was nineteen and considered of age, he would no longer be a prince, but a king.

He didn't know how to feel about this, and so he felt nothing, facing only the next hour ahead.

That's all he ever did.

Cam fell back upon his bed, resting on his back with his forearm over his eyes. The book he carried resting by his side.

He was exhausted today, as he had felt on so many other days. The feeling never changed. He quickly gave himself up to sleep, without even bothering to get dressed, without taking his boots off. His mind drifted until he was in better places, at least at first.

He didn't remember the good part of his dream, only the bad part, the last part, before he woke with a jolt.

He dreamt of hands upon him, being forced to the ground. Then he woke with a gasp, sweating and panting.

Cam let out a slow breath, realising that it was all just a dream. He sighed, hand going to his head.

It was still dark.

He wondered what time it was, whether he had been asleep for an hour or several. Then he let his hand drop, feeling the book by his side.

Vanity's night.

He sat up, fumbling in the dark, he lit the candle which rested on the bedside table, and continued to read.

He read for hours, until the room began to brighten, and morning light shone through the warped glass window to his bedroom. Cam glanced up at the clock on the wall, it was half past seven. At nine o'clock breakfast would be served, in the meantime while he waited, he read.

When the time came, he put his book away and left his room, making his way to the dining hall several floors below. He had to traverse several flights of stairs before he reached the place, and when he did, he found Luke already sitting at the table.

Mealtimes were the only times they would regularly meet now, Luke would often wait for him before beginning his meal, as was the case today.

'Morning Cam' Luke said brightly to him.

Cam shut the tall door behind him silently, slouching towards the table. His eyes were red from lack of sleep; he had spent too long reading late. But that didn't matter, as he sat down now he produced another book, resting it on the table open and beginning to read. On the way he had briefly made a detour and picked it up in one of the palace's many libraries. *Darker eyes* it was called. It was a story about demons rising from the earth, formed from the hatred and greed of the human race, in time they became their own entity. But instead of being vanquished, they formed their own personalities, and changed drastically throughout the story, until at the end; they shrugged off all their bad traits and became holy. They were accepted into heaven itself as an example, as the humans from which they were created, remained on earth, forced to suffer the torment and misery which they created, and brought

upon themselves. Cam liked this story, he had read it several times already, but he was such a quick reader, he was more than happy to read it yet again.

‘You were up late reading again weren’t you?’ Luke asked him, his voice echoing in the vast and otherwise silent hall.

Cam didn’t answer. He only stared down at his book, turning the page loudly and obviously. Luke knew he used the book mainly as a distraction so that he had an excuse not to speak. He would do it at breakfast, lunch time and dinner time. Every single day.

At times Luke would make an attempt to engage him in conversation, other days he wouldn’t bother. Today was the day he made the effort.

Luke’s expression darkened; and he leant forward on his elbows.

‘It’s rude to ignore people’ he told Cam sternly.

‘Morning’ Cam replied flatly without looking up. ‘I *was* up late reading last night. You were correct.’

Luke gave an exasperated sigh, leaning back in his chair and turning away. He receded into a sullen silence, and said no more.

A short while later a servant brought Cam his breakfast. The princes would never ask what they were going to be given to eat, nor did they request anything. Food was simply brought to them like clockwork. Every day it was a little different.

Cam ate his eggs and buttered bread quietly, never lifting his head from the book. Minutes later he heard the noise of a chair being pushed back, footsteps, a door opening and closing, then silence.

Cam stopped chewing; he swallowed his mouthful and looked up. Luke was gone.

He let out a sigh of relief, sitting back in his chair and closing his eyes.

He felt tired, so very tired. His hand went to his head and stayed there for a moment, until he found the resolve to sit straight again.

When he had finished his breakfast, he decided to go back to bed, where he slept for the rest of that morning.

He was woken by a servant at midday, informing him that it was time to attend his lessons.

Cam sat up mutely and the servant left.

He left his room, meandering down several corridors, navigating several twists and turns and going up and down several flights of stairs before reaching the room where the lessons took place. Beyond the door the room was small and bright, sunlight shone through the warped glass on one side. Cam’s attention hovered over the window, for a moment he longed to see through it, but his attention swiftly returned to the room itself, where the teacher waited at the table. Sitting beside the teacher was Luke.

Cam took a seat mutely at the last remaining empty chair, and the lesson began.

The lessons changed every time as they covered each subject, but there were certain things that the princes would be made to return to, certain lessons they were taught over and over again. Today was one of those lessons.

Cam was made to read a passage from one of the books upon the table, reading out loud as the teacher and Luke listened silently.

As he read, Cam glanced briefly up at Luke. The expression his brother wore appeared to be blank. But Cam noticed the slight downward curl of his lips, the way his eye twitched as he followed the passages, staring down at the book on the table before him. He knew that Luke

hated these lessons that happened three times a week, at the same times every week. Cam knew that everything they were being taught was against everything he believed in. Luke was a good and honest person at heart, with a pure soul. He was forgiving and understanding, and couldn't bring himself to cause harm to other people, no matter if they hurt him or someone he cared about, no matter how much they deserved it. Luke just wasn't that way.

Cam on the other hand...

He faltered for a moment, his lips hanging onto the end of the sentence he spoke.

He didn't know what he could do or was capable of if he was forced to it.

In the past Luke had questioned these lessons, even one day going so far as to refuse them altogether. His punishment had been to be locked in a small room for three days with nothing but a bed to lie on. He had been fed well, and allowed out to use the toilet, but other than that he was left in solitary confinement. The boredom had been too much for him to bear. After that, he seemed to welcome the lessons presented to them, pretending to absorb every detail of them.

He never again questioned or spoke against them.

'Cam?' the lecturer spoke expectantly. 'You've stopped reading.'

'Sorry' Cam mumbled, returning his attention back to the pages before him. He continued reading. 'Obey' he began. 'The seven gods are our mothers and fathers, we cannot live without them, we cannot exist without them, without them, our lives are meaningless.' He drew a deep breath before continuing. 'The world is filled with the dead and dying, the world is filled with hate, corruption and betrayal. The gods execute righteousness and justice, through the holy men, we hear their voice.' Cam paused.

'Go on' the teacher said. 'Continue.'

'There are those who are different, there are those who wish to harm the perfect world we are trying to create. Those who are different, wish to harm our way of life, these heathens deserve only to be removed, to burn in flames. Those who are different, deserve to die.'

The lessons only lasted for three hours or so at a time, and after this, the princes could do as they wished.

Cam was left alone, this time Luke did not try to speak to him. Cam made the long trek back to his room, thinking about the book called *Darker Eyes* he was reading, eager to get back to it, he picked up his pace.

Along the way he heard several voices, the voices of children coming his way. He slowed to a stop, watching the end of the corridor, the direction the sounds were coming from. A few seconds later, and the children appeared.

They came running around the corner, laughing as they went. There were five of them. The oldest one was seven, the youngest was five.

The leading child was running with a folded piece of paper in his hand, the paper was shaped like a point and flew through the air when he threw it. The other children chased it as he did this, each trying to catch it.

As they approached Cam, they slowed to a stop one by one, staring up at him. One of the children caught the folded paper wedge before speaking.

‘Hey!’ the young boy said. ‘It’s the prince.’

The children all beamed up at him in awe and wonder and reverence. These were the sons and daughters of some of the council members that had moved to live in the palace. Many had brought their wives with them when they did this, some brought children. They lived here with their families permanently now; some of the children had even been born here.

There was plenty of space for all of them in this vast palace, but even with all the extra people the building housed, it still felt empty, and most of the corridors were still deserted most of the time. The guards were no longer stationed at their posts as they used to be.

Cam smiled kindly down at the little faces beaming up at him. The children loved both the princes, especially the younger children. They looked upon both Cam and Luke like the holy men looked upon the gods. To them, the princes seemed almost like the legends and heroes stepped out of the pages of the adventure books they grew up reading, and they adored them. Especially Cam, who was destined to be king, the older twin, born minutes before his brother. ‘Hello children’ Cam spoke softly.

They all surrounded him, gazing up at him wide eyed.

Cam tilted his head down at them, looking at the folded paper in the boy’s hand.

‘What do you have there?’ he asked, kneeling before the boy and looking at the paper closely.

‘We’re using it to fly with’ the boy explained.

‘May I see it?’ Cam asked politely.

The boy handed it to him, and Cam took it gently. He unfolded the blue paper until it was a square sheet again, placing it on the ground and folding it again a different way.

He did this very quickly, and when he was finished he lifted his hand, the folded paper held between his fingers.

‘Here’ he said handing the paper, now folded in the shape of a flower to one of the girls. ‘For you my lady.’

They all gasped in astonishment, gazing at it in wonder.

‘That was amazing’ the girl said taking it.

‘You’re so lucky to be a prince’ one of the boys said. ‘I would give anything to be you.’

‘It must be nice’ a young girl said, ‘to have such fine clothes and jewels and all the things you could possibly want.’

‘Well’ Cam spoke slowly with a gentle expression, ‘it certainly has its perks.’

‘When you’re king’ one of the boys said, ‘are you going to use your power to make the world a better place?’

Cam bowed his head to the young boy.

‘I hope so’ he replied.

‘You’re going to be a great king’ one of the girls spoke up. ‘I just know it.’

‘I’m honoured that you have such faith in me’ Cam replied, placing his hand gently upon her blonde head.

Her eyes grew large in admiration as she gazed up at him, as if she were nothing but a peasant, and he a god in the flesh.

‘I only hope I am worthy of your praise’ Cam said.

He rose to his feet now.

‘Run along then children’ he told them. ‘A prince is very busy. I have much to do.’

‘Bye Cam’ the children said to him, before one by one running off. ‘Goodbye your highness.’

Very soon, they were out of sight, skipping down the corridor and disappearing around the corner. Cam smiled dreamily after them.

Must be nice to be me? He thought. *Must be nice to be you.*

He continued his way down the corridor, heading to his room where his book waited for him, but before he could reach his bedroom, he ran into a figure.

‘Brioke!’ Cam gasped, his heart constricting in his chest. ‘You’re...you’re back...?’

Brioke lifted his heavy eyes to Cam’s. He had been absent for several months, travelling the kingdom on business. It was a common practice for members of the council to leave the palace in which they lived, for sometimes years at a time. Most it was said did so for their own safety. There were only twenty members of the council left, ten on each side. But there had not been any deaths for many years now, and the situation was considered safer. The left and right hand of the council still ruled the kingdom in his father’s place, and the prince’s were still too young to rule the kingdom. Cam, being the older twin, would be king one day, until then, the council still controlled everything.

‘Cam’ Brioke said. ‘I want to see you in my office’

Cam spoke before he realised what he was saying. ‘But I don’t want to go.’

Without warning Brioke backhanded him hard, sending Cam flying. He fell hard on his side, cringing, hand covering his face where Brioke had hit him as he cowered beneath him.

‘It wasn’t a question, it was an *order*’ Brioke spat, punctuating the sentence with a swift kick to the gut.

Cam curled up, hugging himself in pain, weak and unable to protect himself, unable to do anything, he was completely at Brioke’s mercy.

Brioke knelt down quickly, grabbing Cam by the shoulders. Cam flinched, thinking Brioke would hurt him again.

Instead he kissed him, Cam feeling Brioke deep inside him.

‘I want to see you in my office’ Brioke whispered into Cam’s ear, still holding Cam up, hands gripping his upper arms tightly. ‘Five minutes’ Brioke told him. ‘Don’t keep me waiting.’

He shoved Cam back to the ground and strode away. Cam curled up then, holding himself, breathing slowly to calm his racing heart and blinking furiously, trying his best to keep the tears back.

A minute or so later, he rose slowly, hunched over and holding himself, hands over the place where Brioke had kicked him.

He jogged down the corridors, up and down several stairs, and headed to Brioke’s office.

He knocked on the door, waiting sullenly for it to open. It did.

Brioke stood there, smiling down at him.

‘You’re a good lad’ he said, standing back to allow him to enter.

Cam did so, turning towards the door mournfully, as it closed behind him.

The next morning at breakfast, Luke decided to try to speak to Cam again.

‘This is horrible’ he said, his voice breaking. ‘Why are you doing this to me?’

Cam clenched his jaw, glaring furiously at the book on the table before him.

‘Please speak to me!’ Luke cried, standing abruptly and slamming his hands down on the table, the chair behind him fell backwards to the floor. ‘I can’t take this anymore...’

He moved over to him when Cam did not react, taking his face in his hands and turning Cam’s face up to his.

‘We used to be so close...’ Luke whispered, ‘...what happened?’

Cam gazed up at Luke who held him, his body beginning to tremble, eyes beginning to shimmer. Cam’s throat began to tighten, a small noise passed his lips, a whimper, barely audible.

And then he gathered himself. His brow furrowed, he gritted his teeth in a snarl, grabbing Luke’s hands that held his face and shoving him away.

‘Don’t touch me.’

Cam rose quickly to his feet, turning his back on him and storming away, tears running down his cheeks.

I have to keep Brioke to myself he thought furiously, I have to...or else he might....

Cam slammed shut the doors to the dining hall behind him, leaning back against them and covering his eyes with his forearm.

I have to protect my brother....I have to...I love him.

Chapter Nine

Miranda lay on her bed, gazing blearily up at the ceiling. She now wore her wig all the time, even in bed, to hide the fact that she was losing her hair. But this was the least of her sufferings.

She experienced painful, burning sensations in her arms and legs, weakness, headaches, the feeling that she was walking on hot coals.

She sighed deeply, clenching her teeth and concentrating hard on not throwing up. There was a bowl on her bedside table in case she did so, one that was replaced regularly by her servant.

‘Miranda?’ a voice spoke softly.

She turned her head towards the healer.

‘I need to you take this’ he offered her.

Miranda blinked slowly, staring at the blue pill.

‘It will leach your system of the poison fairly quickly’ the healer told her. ‘Here.’

He handed the pill to her with a glass of water. Miranda struggled to sit up. The healer put the pill in her mouth, holding her head back as he gently held the glass to her lips, helping her drink.

‘I need you to eat this’ the healer said once she had swallowed the pill, handing her a bowl.

‘What is it?’ Miranda asked weakly, staring into the bowl.

‘It’s a cut up banana. It will help replace the potassium you’ve lost in your body.’

He straightened as Miranda began to slowly eat.

‘How does your heart feel?’ he asked her.

‘Not good’ Miranda whispered back.

The healer placed a hand upon her chest, feeling her beating. He straightened again.

‘Your blood pressure is still high’ he told her, ‘your heartbeat is rapid.’
‘When can I leave this room?’ Miranda asked him, lifting a piece of banana to her lips.
‘When you feel ready’ he told her simply. ‘Just concentrate on recovering. You’re lucky to be alive.’
‘How are the boys?’
‘They are fine.’
‘Will I ever fully heal?’ she asked.
‘Only time will tell’ he replied.
He left her shortly after.
She would often wonder as she lay there alone for hours on end, day in, day out, how deep their claws had sunken into her children, and how both sides of the council would be doing their best to rip them apart.
She stared up at the ceiling, too weak even to wish to speak.
It was many weeks later when she was well enough to join her children for breakfast.

Cam and Luke glanced up as the door to the breakfast hall opened. They were both surprised to see her make an appearance; it was clear on their faces.
Miranda moved slowly across the hall, her new handmaiden that followed her, pulled the chair back for her as she sat, and pushed her up to the table.
‘Thank you Tess’ Miranda said quietly. ‘You may go now.’
Tess bowed low and moved away.
Miranda turned her attention onto the boys then. She leant forwards with her elbows on the table, glancing from Cam to the Luke.
‘Children’ she said to them, ‘how have you been?’
Cam and Luke glanced uncertainly at each other.

Triss had always been a happy girl. She had been raised by good parents, and had many siblings, all of which were older than her. It had been hard growing up being overshadowed by all of her brothers and sisters, but Triss had blossomed into a fine woman with a good temperament. She was kind of heart and pure of soul, always seeing the good in everything, no matter how dark. She was beautiful, with long wavy hair, yellow and bright light the sun, and her pretty smile would make anyone else smile too, no matter how sad they were.
But she was never sure as she grew up what she wanted in life. That was, until she met *him*. His name was Peter, and she remembered the day she first laid eyes on him in the wheat field. It was a windy day, and his cloak billowed back as he stood there before her, seemingly as captivated by her beauty as she was by his.
He had dared to reach towards her, drawing his hand back sharply. He placed it over his chest and bowed low to her.
‘What a beautiful maiden’ he had said. ‘You must have walked right out of the fairy tales I’ve read so often, for I have never in all my life seen such magnificence.’
They were married soon after, and both were smitten with each other.
It was shortly after that, that she found out he was an alchemist.
‘Magic’ she had hissed in shock at the discovery. ‘Sorcery.’
‘No’ Peter had shook his head. ‘Science.’

‘Why have you not told me before?’

‘It’s a dangerous profession, especially in times like these where the holy rule over us all. If they found out about this...I don’t know what they would do.’

It was only a few weeks later, that they came for *her*.

‘What are you doing?!’ Triss had cried in panic as they grabbed her by the arms as she went out to the market to buy some food.

‘Triss Lesart. You are under arrest.’

‘What for? I’ve done nothing wrong!’

‘You are guilty for the crime of being a witch’ the other holy man told her coldly. ‘You will be tried and face your punishment.’

Later that night, she was tied to a great wooden cross in the dungeons, the torturer slowly prising her toenails from her with red hot pincers.

Her throat was hoarse from screaming.

‘*I’ve done nothing wrong*’ she repeated yet again. ‘*Please...please* let me go...I am *innocent!*’

‘I’m out of nails’ the torturer said, kneeling before her, acting as if he hadn’t heard. ‘What should we do next?’

‘Is this going to take all night?’ the council member sighed as he stood by the door. ‘I’ve got better things to be doing.’

‘Just as soon as she confesses’ the torturer said.

‘Then get her to confess’ Brioke told him calmly.

Triss screamed again.

‘I’m trying’ the torturer said lazily, straightening as he rose to stand before her, ‘but she is a stubborn one.’

Brioke unfolded his arms, striding forwards down the short flight of steps that descended into the dark room. She gazed back at him in wide eyed terror as he stopped before her.

‘Would you like to see your husband again?’ Brioke asked.

Triss opened her mouth, uttering his name. ‘...Peter?’

The next day, she walked through the streets in chains, crowds of people gathered to watch.

Her hair, once glossy and golden, was now faded and lank and greasy, her dress was filthy, and she was covered in blood. Her wounds had received no care at all.

She raised her head as the guards that surrounded her stopped.

Here she saw her husband.

One of the guards behind her shoved her forwards, towards Peter.

‘I’m sorry’ he sobbed to her as she was tied to the stake beside him. ‘You’re here because of me...’

She stared at him, unable to speak, shaking as she slowly turned to face ahead of her, still not coming to terms in her head with what was really happening.

This was really happening.

She was going to die.

The guard finished tying her, stepping back as another lowered the burning torch to the wood and straw tied below her.

The crowd watched in utter silence as they both screamed, the flames licking their bodies and growing ever higher.

From one of windows in the palace, Brioke watched.

He closed the window, the warped glass blocking out anything that could be seen clearly. He locked the window, placing the little black key back into his pocket.

He was in his room, still hearing the screams from outside, but fainter now.

He left his room, wandering down the corridor. It was here that he ran into Luke, trailing through the halls alone, purely out of boredom and seeking something to do.

Cam came across them only by chance, heading through the palace in search of another room to hide in; one secluded and quiet where he could read in peace; a place where he would not be bothered by anyone else.

He froze as he saw Brioke and Luke standing there at the end of the corridor, talking.

He clenched his fists. The beat in his chest began to quicken.

‘Luke!’ he called out suddenly. ‘Mother wants to see you.’

It was a lie of course. His first instinct was to separate the two, and keep Luke away and safe. Luke gave him a sceptical look, surprised that Cam had spoken to him, before wandering off to find their mother.

When Brioke and Cam were alone in the corridor, Brioke approached him.

‘What are you doing?’ Brioke glowered.

‘I...’ Cam whimpered, holding his hands behind him and staring at the floor. ‘I don’t want you to touch Luke...I want you to myself....’ he felt sick as he spoke these words, disgusted at himself.

Brioke grabbed his chin and lifted, bending down and kissing him.

He took Cam to a quiet room, where they stayed for several minutes.

Afterwards, Cam went to wash himself. And then he went to pray.

‘Tim’ Miranda said with surprise as she entered her room to find him standing there. ‘Is everything alright?’

‘It is’ Tim answered solemnly stepping forwards.

‘Are the boys safe?’

‘Yes’ Tim replied. He stared at her intently. ‘It’s time to receive my payment’ he spoke in a low voice.

‘Now?’ she sighed wearily.

He nodded.

‘Fine.’

She undressed quickly and lay on the bed.

He rose from his seat, moving over to her, undressing and leaning over her.

He parted her legs, pushing into her. And then he began to move.

She took no pleasure in the act as he did this to her, but he didn’t care.

When he was finished, they each sat on the edge of the bed, backs to one another.

‘I’ve done what I can’ Tim said in a distant voice. ‘The boy’s lives are not in danger. I’ve been watching the council members closely. They wish not to harm them.’

Miranda listened to his words as he spoke, but she did not answer.

He turned back to face her, staring at the back of her head, contemplating whether he should say more, before deciding against it. He looked ahead again.

‘I should go now.’

There was a knock on the door then, Tim and Miranda stared at the door for a moment, before Miranda rose and went over to it, putting on a silk dressing gown as she went.

She opened the door a crack to see Luke standing there.

‘You wanted to see me?’ he asked her tentatively.

‘No’ she snapped shortly at him. ‘Did you want something?’

‘Um...’ Luke began, uncertain now. ‘No.’

‘Then go away.’

She closed the door and returned to her bed.

Outside in the corridor, Luke turned away, his mind whirling furiously.

Cam knelt before the statue of the goddess Micro, a woman who stood tall, on one side she held her arm outstretched, on the other, her wing curled around her body. Behind her head upon the wall was painted a great circle to represent the sun. She was the goddess thought to take most pleasure in giving life, making the grass green, making crops grown rich and healthy; and making children born strong and happy.

Cam bowed his head, hands together as he prayed.

Minutes later he lifted his head, rising to his feet and turning away from the small room. It was a modest temple within the palace, a private room in which to pray. Cam came here more and more often as he grew up. He left, closing the door quietly after him as he wandered the corridors of the palace.

It was quiet, and there was no one else around as Cam made his way to his bedroom, thoughts of what book he would read next on his mind.

He had nearly reached the door to his room, when a voice stopped him.

‘How are you this evening Cam?’ Brioke asked him.

Cam’s heart jolted in his chest, and he turned back to Brioke reluctantly. *Twice in one day? Oh please gods no.*

‘I’m fine’ Cam replied meekly.

‘Are you doing well in your studies?’ Brioke asked.

‘Yes...I think so.’

‘And you’re doing your homework?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hmmm.’

Brioke made as if to turn away, but suddenly turned back sharply, backhanding Cam hard.

Cam fell to his knees at the force of the blow, facing away from him. Brioke grabbed him with one hand around the back of the neck, Cam instantly sobbed in fear, afraid of what would happen next. He threw Cam forwards on his front, but instead of feeling Brioke’s bodyweight upon him like he usually did, he experienced instant pain as Brioke kicked him hard. Cam rolled onto his side. Brioke kicked him again several times in the stomach, then once hard across the face. Cam rolled onto his back, *then* Brioke bore down upon him, holding him in place with his weight.

Cam stared up in fear at Brioke. For a second he did nothing, then he grabbed Cam around the throat with one hand, with the other, he swung back a fist, punching Cam several times in the face.

When he was done, he leant close to him, whispering into his ear.

‘Don’t forget about me.’ Then he rose and walked briskly away, not looking back, acting as if nothing had happened.

Cam held his bleeding nose with both hands.

He glanced about the corridor in case anyone had seen. He then wiped up the blood left on the floor beside him with a sleeve, and withdrew into his room.

It wasn’t long later that Brioke returned, barging through the door without warning and slamming it behind him. Cam wheeled around, heart sinking in his chest at the sight of him, still bleeding and in pain from his injuries. Brioke strode up to him, grabbing Cam by the shirt and throwing him down onto the bed.

Sometime later he left, and Cam pushed himself gingerly off the bed, trying to stop himself from sobbing as he rasped painfully through clenched teeth, balling the sheets in his fists.

He washed himself tenderly, body aching all over. Then dressed in fresh clothes and went to bed.

That night, Cam woke with a start. He tossed and turned as he slept, feeling in his dreams unwanted hands upon him in the dark. He sat bolt upright suddenly, waking abruptly and gasping deeply with his racing heart.

He calmed after a few seconds, and then noticed dampness in the bed. He threw the sheets back and rose to stand quickly, staring down at the damp in the bed for several seconds in confusion.

He turned and strode away to change his clothes, sucking his thumb as he went.

In the morning he woke early and painted his face to hide the bruising. He was the first to arrive for breakfast, and waited for his mother and brother to appear while the servants brought him his food.

‘Morning Cam’ Luke said when he had arrived. ‘What happened to your face? It’s all swollen?’

‘I walked into the door’ Cam replied quickly, having thoroughly rehearsed this excuse.

‘Oh’ Luke replied. ‘That was clumsy of you. I’m here!’ he called to the servants. ‘Can I have my breakfast please?’

Their mother arrived shortly after, saying nothing to either of her sons. She ate quickly and left, Luke finished after her.

‘Do you want to go out for a ride with me?’ Luke offered him. ‘The horses could do with some exercise.’

Cam turned his head slowly towards Luke. The brothers had on more than one occasion ridden the horses inside the palace, only able to travel up and down the stairs with the gentler inclines. But there were so many stairs in the palace; they could still get to whichever floor they wanted.

‘No’ Cam answered shortly, shaking his head. ‘I’m fine...thanks.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Why is it taking you so long to eat your breakfast?’

‘I’ve got a bit of an upset stomach’ Cam mumbled in reply. ‘That’s why I got up so early...I couldn’t sleep. I’ll be fine.’

‘If you say so’ Luke rose to his feet, turning away to leave. He paused then, glancing back at his twin. ‘Hope you get better soon’ he said sincerely, before marching out of the hall.

‘Bye’ Cam mumbled after him, feeling tears prickling in his eyes.

The tall door shut, the noise echoing in the silent hall.

Cam glanced about the hall, and saw no one else around. He let out a heavy sigh, pushing his unfinished plate of food away from him and resting his forehead on the table. With his head still on the table, he lifted his shirt carefully with a shaking hand to see his stomach. There was large bruising clearly visible.

He sighed again, letting his shirt fall. He stayed where he sat for ages.

Of course, the real reason he had come to breakfast so early, was so that no one would see him walk, with his body hunched over, and the agony clearly shown on his face.

Interlude start

‘Venus!’ the man cried. ‘Stop! You’re tickling me!’

Venus clutched him ever tighter, hands moving quickly beneath the sheets as he worked.

‘That’s the whole point’ Venus laughed, nuzzling into his neck. ‘You are mine. Don’t you know? You belong to me.’

Kai turned over to face him, resting on his side. His wrists were handcuffed before him.

Venus smirked at him. ‘You’re so handsome’ he said, brushing Kai’s shaggy black hair back, his pale skin was light and beautiful.

Kai smiled back at him, lifting his arms up so that the chain between his wrists went around the back of Venus’ neck, holding them together.

‘Don’t worry’ Venus whispered delicately in his ear, moving his lips down Kai’s neck and to his shoulders as he held him close. ‘It won’t leave a mark.’

‘I wouldn’t mind if you did’ Kai admitted. ‘I am yours after all.’

Venus’s eyes fluttered up to Kai’s face, before lowering again. He moved further down, until his lips were hovering over Kai’s chest. He opened his mouth wide. Kai flinched, as Venus sunk his teeth in, his fangs drawing blood.

Venus moaned in pleasure at the taste of him.

‘Your blood is so delicious...’

And then the door to the room opened.

Venus lifted his head slowly towards the figure standing in the doorway; Kai beside him stared in surprise.

‘Reuben’ Venus said, propping himself up on an elbow to see him better. ‘Do you not know the meaning of a closed door in this sort of establishment?’

‘I would say I’m sorry but I’m not’ Reuben replied, removing the plague mask from his face and lowering his hood. ‘How did you know it was me?’

‘Only you would try to find me anywhere’ Venus answered.

‘Is this a friend of yours?’ Kai spoke up.

‘I suppose’ Venus answered. ‘Of a sorts...’

‘He’s handsome’ Kai replied, turning his eyes back onto him.

‘How did you know I was here?’ Venus asked Reuben

‘Because’ Reuben said, leaning on the doorframe and crossing his arms, ‘you’re predictable.’

Venus stared at Reuben for a moment, before bowing his head and smirking. ‘If you say so.’

He sat up, pushing himself up the bed and leaning back against the headboard. ‘So what do you want? Why do you interrupt my pleasure time?’

‘I want your help with something back home, I was just looking at one of the monitors and.....hey... you listening to me?’

As Reuben was speaking, Venus’ attention quickly drifted back towards Kai. He began to caress him, tilting his head towards his and stroking his jawbone, running his fingers up his cheek and towards his ear.

‘Venus?’

A twinge of annoyance crossed Venus’ brow, and his eyes swam back towards Reuben.

He gave a huff.

‘What?’ Venus huffed moodily. ‘What is it? What do you want?’

‘I want you to help me with something back home’ Reuben told him patiently.

‘Now?’

‘Uh...yeah’ Reuben said. ‘Now.’

‘You won’t forget about me will you?’ Kai whispered to Venus longingly, pulling him closer with the chain between his wrists. ‘You’ll come back for me won’t you?’

‘Always’ Venus uttered, turning his head towards him and kissing him deeply.

‘Venus’ Reuben said again patiently.

‘Fine!’

Venus lifted Kai’s arms, freeing himself from the chain around his neck and shuffling across the bed beneath the sheets.

Reuben turned his back as Venus rose to stand, completely naked.

‘I couldn’t find any of the others’ Reuben was saying as he stood in the doorway, speaking to the open sky above.

‘Not even your brother?’ Venus asked, lifting the black robe over his shoulders.

‘He went out’ Reuben replied simply.

Venus took his plague mask from the desk nearby, leaning forwards over the bed and kissing Kai one last time before straightening again and raising his hood, he tucked the plague mask in a hidden pocket inside his robe.

‘Until next time’ Venus said to Kai, turning from the room and following Reuben out the door and into the streets beyond.

He closed the door behind him and took a deep breath. Venus followed after Reuben who had raised his own hood, and hidden his own mask in a pocket inside his robes. Venus picked up his pace to keep up with Reuben.

‘I love this place’ Venus said glancing about him. ‘It’s my favourite world.’

The streets around them thronged with people of all sorts. It was always busy here, even at night.

‘Oh by the way’ Reuben said turning to Venus tapping his own lips, ‘you’ve got a....uh...’

Venus wiped the blood from the corner of his lips, straightening up again.

‘I know I’m clockwork now’ Venus said as they walked, ‘but the desire for blood has never gone away.’

‘It’s all in the mind’ Reuben told him. ‘I’m sure you don’t even need it to live anymore.’

‘You’re probably right’ Venus admitted. ‘But it’s hard to give up a habit I was born into.’

‘Do you miss your old life?’ Reuben asked him.

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘Because now...’ he smirked. ‘It’s much more fun. I am no longer confined by the night.’

‘You just like the power and control’ Reuben frowned.

‘That too. Don’t tell me *you* don’t enjoy it as well.’

They walked in silence for a while, Venus gazing happily about them as they went.

Even at a mere glance one could see this city was a special place indeed. It was a mishmash of different cultures, styles, races and religions. This was an open city, just like so many in this world. They were a tolerant people. Almost anything was allowed as long as it didn’t cause harm.

Two women passed them in the street wearing what appeared at first to be only their underwear but made of leather. They wore heavy jewels around their necks, clocks and mechanical pieces in their hair, and around their waists, belts filled with pistols and knives.

They continued walking, passing a small section of green in the city, one of the few gardens that existed here, where a couple were having sex out in the open, though everything was covered by the woman’s long skirt. No one paid them any attention. They were blocked momentarily from view by a carriage, pulled by a mechanical horse made of silver metal, moving at a trot.

They also witnessed a man approaching them in the street walking the other way, he had very dark skin. There were black plastic strips weaved into his hair and clearly visible, and from his back grew large wings like that of an angel. But these were mechanical wings.

By his side walked a shaggy black dog, around its muzzle was a sharp mechanical jaw and upon its head, it wore a top hat.

These were only a few of the things that they saw.

Despite all the differences of those that lived here (or those just passing through), there was one thing that all the people here shared.

The desire to travel.

‘Do you miss your old life then Reuben?’ Venus asked, catching the eye of a young woman they passed. She had ivory skin, white blonde hair and a pretty blue dress. Wrapped around her waist was a giant snake, with white skin like the girls, and pale eyes.

‘There are some things I regret I cannot enjoy anymore’ Reuben admitted, ‘people I miss, friends...loved ones.’

‘That place you knew still exists’ Venus said. ‘I don’t understand why you don’t go back there.’

Reuben shook his head. 'That time has been and gone, like growing up in a happy childhood. It was great at the time, but you can never go back and re-experience it. It would never be the same.' He sighed. 'All the people I knew back in the life I used to live are dead now. Times have changed....I could never go back.'

'Such is the curse of immortality' Venus said sarcastically. 'Oh what a burden.'

'It is a burden' Ruben argued. 'Of a sorts.'

'How so?'

'Well...I'm not a guardian anymore. Neither is my brother. I cannot use my old powers in this body.'

Venus shrugged at that mutely.

'The same goes for Tiara' Reuben continued. 'She is no longer a Weather Maker.'

'You sacrifice something small' Venus told him, 'to gain something far bigger. Look at all you know now and have learnt over these many years. Look at the worlds you have visited and visit still.'

'I'm grateful at least that I can share this experience with my brother' Reuben said.

'Yes' Venus replied in a comical tone. 'At least Lucas plays this game more seriously...or less seriously depending on how you look at it...hmm...which is the best way to phrase it?'

They slowed their pace slightly to make their way through a crowd that had gathered on one of the street corners just outside a theatre. The men wore waistcoats, the women wore corsets, but both sexes wore top hats and lots of leather and the same sorts of trinkets carried on their person. Clocks and stopwatches and mechanical cogs they wore in their hair, on their clothes, or hanging from their waists. Some had goggles on their hats, keys and pendants and chains. Many women wore high boots. One of the women they passed was fanning herself with a metal fan. One of the men they passed had a mechanical hand; blue lights from the joints shone brightly even in the daylight.

All around them as they walked the streets, they saw industrial steam powered machinery, along with so many other things.

'So you're going by the name Venus now' Reuben said.

'I sure am.'

'What happened to your last name?'

'I decided to change it' Venus sang happily back winking at him.

'Do you even remember your original name?' Reuben asked sceptically, raising an eyebrow and ignoring the gesture. 'The one your parents gave you?'

'Umm' he pondered. 'It was Aubrey.'

'Why did you decide to change it?' Reuben asked.

'Why not?' Venus shrugged. 'I like the name I have now. I can do whatever I want.'

'Are you going to change it again?'

'Most likely.'

'What to?'

'I like....' he thought for a moment, 'Vergil' he finished. 'That will be nice. I'll probably use it in a few years time.'

He winked to a woman with short blonde hair on one side, and long black hair on the other. She wore laced gloves and on her shoulder was a tattoo on an octopus with pretty flowers sprouting from the ends of its tentacles. There were many with tattoos here, one shirt-less

man they passed had a tattoo of a snake winding up his spine. Another had a tattoo that looked like the inside of his body was mechanical, with a metal beating heart and metal ribs. One woman they passed had a tattoo on her leg that made her flesh look as if it had been carved like wood with beautiful patterns.

‘Your man seems nice’ Reuben commented, glancing back down the street and towards the building they had left.

‘I love handsome young men with black hair’ Venus winked.

‘He’s a bit young isn’t he?’

‘He’s nineteen’ Venus said flatly. ‘He’s well above the legal age.’

‘You’re a bit old for him aren’t you?’

‘Yeah but I look young don’t I?’ Venus suddenly grabbed his arm and wheeled him around.

‘Come on. How young do I look? Twenty? Twenty five? Young...fit and sexy. Who wouldn’t want me?’

‘It still doesn’t change the fact you’re really really old.’

‘Hey’ Venus shrugged. ‘It worked in twilight.’

‘That was a shit book.’

‘Yeah it was.’

Reuben frowned at him. ‘Anyway, I thought you weren’t gay.’

‘I wasn’t until recently. You never know what you like until you try it.’

‘What?’ Reuben scoffed.

Venus moved closer to him so that their faces were inches apart, his lips hovering over Reuben’s. Reuben instantly adopted a bored expression, his eyes glazed over.

‘You never know’ Venus smirked playfully; ‘...*you* might like it.’ His eyes became gentle and warm. ‘I like handsome young men with black hair’ he said again, reaching forwards and caressing Reuben’s black hair. He leant forwards towards Reuben.

Reuben’s hand quickly shot up as he clamped it over Venus’ mouth before he could kiss him.

‘I think not’ Reuben said stepping back. ‘I don’t sit on that side of the fence.’

Venus smirked again; the edges of his eyes crinkled happily.

‘Suit yourself’ came his muffled reply behind Reuben’s hand. ‘Your loss.’ He stepped back, tilting his head. ‘So what do you want me to help you with?’

‘I want you to come with me back home’ Reuben said. ‘There’s something I want to show you.’

They came to the edge of the town, looking over the wall to the world below their feet.

The entire city was a floating city, a great engine always running, cutting a path through the clouds as it forever glided over a silent world hundreds of feet below.

‘Beautiful’ Venus sighed, as Reuben used his magic to open a portal beside them.

He slipped through, and Venus followed, returning to the place they called home.

A few moments later, and the two were staring at one of the monitors, watching a young boy on his knees, praying before a statue his people knew as the goddess Micro.

‘You dragged me here for this?’ Venus asked incredulous. ‘Couldn’t it have waited? Why didn’t you ask your brother, or anyone else for that matter?’

‘You were the only one I could find’ Reuben said. ‘He needs help’ he said turning back to the monitor. ‘He...’

Reuben broke off suddenly.

‘What?’ Venus asked him.

‘Look’ Reuben said, watching the boy on the screen closely. ‘Do you see that?’

‘What?’ Venus said again, turning back to the screen.

‘Read his lips.’

Venus fell silent as he did so. Seconds later he spoke.

‘Wow’ he said. ‘That’s amazing.’

‘He’s praying for his brother’s safety’ Reuben said in awe. ‘He’s praying to keep Brioke to himself.’

‘He must care greatly for his brother’ Venus said, leaning over the controls and typing away furiously.

‘You just changed the weather’ Reuben told him.

‘Oh.’ Venus leant back. ‘What was it you wanted me to do?’

A flicker of annoyance crossed Reuben’s face.

‘Help him’ Reuben said shortly. ‘Please. Do *something*.’

‘I’ve got it’ Venus continued, leaning back over the controls and typing. ‘I will answer his prayer.’ He pressed the ‘enter command’ button.

Reuben and Venus straightened, watching the screen.

Cam on the monitor rose to his feet and left the prayer room, making his way to his bedroom.

That was when Brioke appeared.

‘What did you do?’ Reuben asked suspiciously, as Brioke on the monitor backhanded Cam hard, causing him to fall on his knees.

‘You care too much’ Venus said simply, watching as Brioke grabbed Cam around the back of his neck and threw him to the floor.

Reuben gritted his teeth as he watched Brioke kick him several times. He then bore down on him, punching him several times in the face.

‘This is not what I wanted’ Reuben said through his teeth.

‘What do you mean?’ Venus asked innocently.

Reuben typed on the controls, pressing the ‘enter command’ button. He glanced up to the monitor again.

Brioke leant over Cam, whispering into his ear. Then he rose and walked briskly away, not looking back. Cam withdrew into his room.

‘You’re doing it wrong’ Venus protested, typing his own commands into the machine again.

‘He asked for Brioke to be kept to himself.’

‘To protect his brother’ Reuben protested.

‘I’m only giving him what he’s asked for’ Venus said in his defence. ‘Enter command’ Venus sang happily, pressing the button again.

Reuben and Venus watched the monitor expectantly.

It wasn’t long later that Brioke returned, barging through the door without warning and slamming it behind him.

‘You’re a sick man’ Reuben said flatly, watching as Brioke threw Cam onto the bed and began tearing at his clothes, bearing down on him.

‘He’s the one who is wrong’ Venus said, eyes flashing as he watched Cam on the monitor.

‘He asked for this.’

Venus turned his back swiftly on the monitors, smirking at Reuben before striding away.

Reuben glanced back to the screen, watching as Brioke thrust into Cam, Cam biting on his own hand to stop himself crying out.

Reuben sighed deeply, reaching forward and turning the screen off.

He walked away.

Interlude end

Three years later Twins aged seventeen

It had been years since Tim had first gone missing, and Miranda could only assume the worst. In all the time that had passed, the council had only grown stronger, and their hold over her eldest son had only strengthened.

Now she lived in constant fear for her life. It had been over two years since she left the floor her bedroom was on after recovering from near death after being poisoned, and on most days she didn't even leave her room at all. Her servant did everything for her. She brought books and games for her to keep her occupied throughout the days, told her news of the happenings within the council and the kingdom beyond, and brought her all her food, of course tasting all of it before allowing the queen to eat.

Miranda was now a shadow of her former self, she had never been happy in the palace, but now, things had never been worse. She had survived her poisoning years ago, but had never fully recovered. She suffered everyday for it. Her life could barely be called living anymore.

One day, Luke came to her.

'You can't spend your life in this room' he had said to her.

She had nothing to say in reply, too tired even for an answer, she couldn't find the strength in her to even care.

'When was the last time you went outside?' Luke asked her, kneeling before her as she sat on the edge of her bed. He leaned closer to get a better look at her. 'Your skin is so pale.'

'Outside?' Miranda mumbled. 'I don't even remember.'

'Come with me.'

'Where?' she groaned. 'All of the doors to the outside are either locked or guarded, and I dare not venture where I might be seen.'

'You don't have to' Luke said to her. 'I know a place where you can see the outside. It's been a secret all this time. No one else knows about it...save for Cam.'

'What are you talking about?' she murmured.

'Come with me' Luke said, taking her gently by the arm. He helped her to her feet.

Her handmaiden stationed by the door, watched silently as Luke helped his mother walk. It was difficult for her, and she held onto her son's arm for support. But shuffling along slowly, she managed.

'It's alright' Luke spoke gently to her. 'Nothing's going to happen to you, you're safe with me around.'

‘Thank you’ Miranda whispered quietly. ‘Thank you...’

It took them several minutes to walk the distance that for Luke would have taken no time at all, and as Luke held onto his mother to support her, couldn’t help but noticing how her body trembled constantly.

She groaned then, stopping suddenly and rubbing her chest firmly.

‘It hurts’ she wheezed, short of breath. ‘My heart...’

‘Are you having trouble breathing?’

Luke in his childhood had had little care for his mother, but as he matured, as the gap between himself and his brother had widened and the council’s poison had spread, he had developed new feelings for her. It hurt him to see her suffer like this, and he might have even gone so far as to say that he cared for her, loved her even, as a son should love his mother.

But he didn’t know what that felt like, so he couldn’t say for sure.

‘I can’t...’ Miranda gasped. ‘I can’t...’

Luke bent down then, holding her and lifting her in his arms.

‘Luke what are you...?’

‘It’s easier this way’ he replied simply to her, beginning to walk. ‘I don’t want to put unnecessary strain on you.’

Miranda relaxed in his arms, tilting her head and resting against his chest. She let out a sigh, closing her eyes.

Luke put her down after a time, once they had reached a small door, the entrance to the tower.

‘What is this?’ Miranda gasped as she straightened.

‘Can you manage the rest of the way?’ Luke asked her. ‘There is something I wish to show you.’

‘I will be fine’ Miranda nodded. ‘Thank you.’

Luke nodded. ‘After you.’

Miranda led the way up the tower, Luke followed after her, closing the door behind them quietly.

When Miranda reached the top of the tower, she froze.

‘Well?’ Luke asked, unable to stop himself from grinning. ‘What do you think?’

‘This is amazing’ Miranda uttered, tears brimming in her eyes. ‘It’s been so long since I felt the sun...felt the wind...saw the sky, the city and the beach’ she said turning to face one way then the other way.

Miranda bowed her head then, brushing away her tears before Luke saw them fall.

‘You come here with Cam sometimes?’ she began hastily, trying to divert Luke’s attention.

‘Not for a long time. Now...I come here alone.’

‘Well now you won’t have to’ Miranda finished, turning to face him again.

Luke glanced at her. He broke into a smile.

‘This is a spectacular find’ she said to him. ‘Thank you for sharing this with me.’

‘Its fine’ Luke said turning away. ‘Don’t worry about it, just...keep it secret.’

‘That goes without saying.’

That sat together for hours, simply watching the world around them, watching the sun crawl across the sky, before beginning to sink towards the horizon, casting the buildings in the city before it an orange glow.

‘It’s beautiful’ Miranda said as they sat upon the wall. ‘So so beautiful....’ She sighed wearily, bowing her head.

‘Are you alright?’ Luke asked her.

‘My body feels numb,’ she mumbled, ‘and my head...’ she said, touching her forehead. ‘I’m constantly suffering the most terrible headaches.’

Luke looked to her now. She no longer wore her wig these days, the wig that made her look far prettier than she really was. Her black hair, though scruffy and cut uneven as it always had been, had grown a little longer, and she was no longer losing her hair. She no longer dressed in ‘decent’ clothes anymore. Most of the time, she simply wore her white under dress, or the nightgown she slept in. Nowadays, no one even saw her anymore, save for her servant and her own sons.

She had natural beauty once, and had been as beautiful as her sons were handsome. But no more.

‘Am I going to die?’ Miranda asked out of the blue, speaking quietly, though her voice seemed to cut sharply through the air. ‘What is going to happen to us?’

‘I...’ Luke hesitated, ‘I don’t know...’

‘I wonder what Cam is doing now?’ Miranda said aloud.

‘I don’t know’ Luke said again. ‘I hardly see him anymore.’

‘A king must care about his people’ his male tutor was saying. ‘He must listen to the advice of the council which guides him, the left and the right hands of the king, this is most important.’

Cam stared down at the open book before him, the histories of his kingdom. He had already been told of several examples of kings not listening to their people and the suffering it caused, in one case even leading to civil war. He blinked back tears as he stared down at the pages, not even hearing his tutor speak anymore as he was being prepared for the day he would become king, which was fast approaching, and Cam was terrified.

His throat felt tight and his mouth felt dry. He felt so frustrated and angry all the time, and wanted to pick up the book and throw it away.

But more than anything, Cam was scared.

He was so tired of being frightened all the time, with only two years until he became king, he felt suffocated with the pressure and expectation that closed ever tighter around him with every passing day.

Sometimes he wished he could just run away from it all. He didn’t want to be a king. He didn’t want to live in a palace. He didn’t want to live every day of his life in fear. Fear of being beaten, fear of being raped, but most of all fear for his brother, because if anything happened to Luke, he could never forgive himself.

At least he is safe Cam thought as he swallowed the lump in his throat, clenching his teeth. *At least there is that...*

In the years that had passed, the relationship between Cam and his brother had only gotten worse. Now Luke had become angry.

‘Don’t you walk away from me!’

Cam turned back to him.

‘You gonna stop me?’

Luke’s eye twitched then, Cam knew he had gotten under his skin.

‘You can’t shut me out’ Luke snapped. ‘I won’t let you.’

‘And what can you do about it?’ *I’m sorry Luke. This is for your own good.* ‘I don’t care about you.’

‘The most painful part of that to hear’ Luke said, ‘is that I’m starting to believe it.’

‘Just get out of my face!’ Cam shoved him back. ‘How long are you going to trail after me? I have a life of my own you know. We’re not kids any more. Things have changed.’

‘I know that better than anyone’ Luke spoke in a whisper, ‘believe me.’

‘What’s all this shouting?’

Cam’s heart jolted in his chest at the all too familiar voice.

‘You shouldn’t be causing such a disruption’ Brioke said.

‘Like *you* care’ Luke snapped viciously. ‘Why should you care?’

Brioke narrowed his eyes dangerously at him.

His attention turned towards Cam.

‘Cam I want to see you in my office.’

Cam’s heart sunk in his chest, and a dark cloud descended over him.

‘Now please’ Brioke said. ‘Follow me.’

Cam spared his brother one last glance with an expression that revealed nothing, before following after Brioke. Luke gave the pair a strange look as they went, an expression Cam didn’t recognise.

The walk to the office was torture. Each step that Cam took was filled with dread. Cam thought desperately for a way out, a route of escape. But nothing came to him, nothing that would work.

They reached the office door all too soon, and Brioke held the door open for him.

‘After you’ Brioke said.

Cam entered the dimmed office slowly with his head bowed, walking carefully past Brioke and watching him closely out of the corner of his eye.

Brioke closed the door, and locked it behind him.

Cam had wandered to the middle of the room. A place where Brioke both worked and slept, it had several desks about the place, one small bed in the corner, some bookshelves in other corners. It was a smallish room with no windows. It was lit only by a few small candles about the place. Cam wondered then if the servants of the palace lit the candles, and would they try to come into the room now or very soon? But Cam knew.

It was a distant hope at best.

Brioke strolled over towards his soft chair beside one of the desks, sitting back with, one leg crossed over the other.

He let out a heavy breath, regarding Cam closely.

‘Take off your clothes.’

Cam tensed at this, their eyes meeting for a brief moment. Then Cam’s eyes slid to the floor again, still wide with fear. He raised his hands to his shirt buttons, trying not let his hands shake, and began to undo them slowly, one by one.

Brioke did not tell him to hurry up, almost as if he was savouring the moment. He watched Cam as he unbuttoned his shirt, very slowly.

When all the buttons were undone, Cam slowly lowered the shirt off his shoulders, and let the garment slip to the floor. He held himself then, arms over his stomach and jaw tight. He did not look up.

‘And the rest’ Brioke ordered.

Cam didn’t move.

‘I said-’

‘I don’t want to do this anymore!’ Cam blurted out, straightening slightly and looking him in the eye now.

Brioke didn’t answer; he only continued to watch Cam for the longest time.

In his chest, Cam’s heart began to race, and his palms began to sweat.

Brioke bowed his head very slowly, never breaking eye contact. He rose swiftly then, striding up to Cam and backing him against the wall. Cam was quaking in fear, pushing himself against the wall as if wishing it would swallow him up, staring up with wide eyes at Brioke, unable to get further away from him.

‘I said’ Brioke spoke dangerously, ‘take off...the rest...’

Cam began to shake visibly now, unable to break his gaze from him.

He then dared look away, glancing to the only door to the office. He looked back at Brioke, and made a break for it.

Brioke grabbed him before he could take more than few steps, pulling him back towards him.

‘Get off me!’ Cam cried. ‘Let go!’

He stumbled with Brioke still holding him tightly, and fell on his back, Brioke bearing down on him, fighting with him to keep him still. Cam began to scream in desperation.

‘*Be quiet*’ Brioke hissed, fighting to keep him subdued, fighting to keep his arms down.

In a split second that Cam managed to free one of his arms in the struggle, he lashed out at Brioke, scratching his face right across a cheek. Brioke stopped moving then, and Cam froze in horror at what he had done, staring up at him.

Brioke slowly touched a hand to his cheek, seeing specks of blood from the scratch on his fingers.

He looked back at Cam below him, his lip curling in a snarl of rage. Cam’s fear began to heighten, but it all stopped suddenly, when Brioke grabbed a heavy paperweight from his desk, and swung it hard across his forehead.

Chapter Ten

Cam woke on his front, and in agony.

He heaved himself up off the floor with a groan, crying, body beginning to tremble as he realised what had been done to him.

He buckled up his belt again, crawling towards the wall and sitting there, curled up in a ball for many minutes.

He touched the spot on his head where he had been struck, feeling a lump there, before withdrawing his hand.

Brioke was long gone, and Cam left the room sometime later, when he felt ready, when he felt safe.

He went back to his own room to tend to his injuries, applying a paste onto his forehead to reduce the swelling, before washing himself and changing into fresh clothes.

It was only midday, but he was just thinking about going to bed to sleep, when there came a knock at his door.

He whipped around, heart hammering in his chest. Cam took a slow and steady breath before speaking.

‘Who’s there?!’

‘I’m just a servant’ came a muffled voice through the door.

Cam hesitated, realising the servant was waiting for permission to be allowed to enter.

‘Come in’ Cam said at last, and the door opened.

‘I’m sorry my lord’ the timid young lady said, ‘but I’ve been ordered to find you. You are being summoned by the council.’

Cam’s heart sunk in his chest.

He waved the servant away, who bowed submissively and scurried off.

The council... Cam thought in his mind. *...oh god...*

From time to time Cam had been expected to take part in the council meetings, more often now as he matured, as the time grew closer when he was to be crowned king at age nineteen, just two years from now.

Cam felt sick.

He made his way to the council chamber as quickly as he could, not daring to make them wait.

He paused only for a moment, feeling fatigued, his chest hurting as his heart skipped many beats, and feeling a sudden headache coming on.

Cam straightened again, trying his best to ignore these discomforts, he continued on.

The council chamber was many flights down, the meetings always taking place in the same empty hall. And this is was this hall where Cam found himself.

He paused before the doors, taking a deep breath before stepping forwards, opening one of the doors and entering the council chamber, where the others waited for him.

The left and the right hands of the king, once there had been many, now there were just twelve. Seven on the right hand, and five on the left.

The rest had been killed. It was no longer a secret that they had died. Originally, when the king was alive, there had been forty, but only the wisest and most cunning had survived these long years while the rest had perished.

But Brioke had survived. Brioke had lived.

He sat there beside the only empty seat at the table, the seat the prince was to sit; the one just for Cam.

Cam swallowed the lump in his throat, allowing the door to swing shut behind him, and making his way reluctantly over to the chair.

He sat without a word, staring down at his lap.

‘You took your time getting here’ Castello said to him, leaning forwards on his elbow, addressing the prince. ‘Next time I advise you not to keep us all waiting.’

‘I’m sorry’ Cam replied. ‘I came as soon as I could.’

‘In any case’ Lamont spoke up, ‘let’s get back to the subject at hand.’

Cam bowed his head further, averting his gaze from all others, as Lamont began to speak.

‘We must address the problem of the gypsies.’

‘What about them?’ Heremon asked.

‘They do not follow our religions’ Lamont shot back. ‘They are wanderers, tricksters, thieves and fortune tellers, the lowest form of vermin. We cannot allow them to pollute our kingdom with their sorcery.’

‘But they do follow our religions’ Heremon reasoned.

‘They follow the religion of whichever area they happen to be passing through at that time’ Lamont answered shortly. ‘We cannot have people constantly on the move like that, who knows what secrets they are telling our enemy.’

‘And which enemy is that?’ Rhona smirked in amusement, resting his elbows on the table with his chin in his hands.

‘We do not control the kingdom beyond our borders’ Tarrant said to him. ‘It’s not right to allow such treacherous people to come and go as they please, they could be putting our own people in danger. I do not trust those beyond our own lands. Who knows what they might be plotting against us.’

‘My dear Tarrant’ Agnus chuckled, ‘you are too suspicious of people. You don’t trust *anyone*.’

‘And that’s why I’m still alive when all your friends have died’ Tarrant shot back.

‘Gentleman!’ Storin hollered, before an argument could break out. ‘Let’s keep our minds focused shall we? Whichever side we sit on we must agree at least that the gypsies are a problem.’

‘Why?’ Denzil asked. ‘They are self sufficient, they stay out of the way when they need to, and many people enjoy their music and dancing, and their women are quite beautiful.’

‘They spread false words from false gods because they travel to other lands’ Eden said. ‘Then they come here and spread their poison.’

‘But think of how they might spread word of *our* religion to other lands’ Desmond spoke up.

‘Which will eventually cause unrest beyond our borders’ Valeri finished, he narrowed his eyes dangerously. ‘They need to be controlled.’

Desmond leant back in his chair. ‘What do you propose?’

A hushed silence fell upon the council members.

‘I say we kill them’ Storin grumbled.

‘Have you gone mad man?’ Rhona asked incredulous.

‘Anything that does not have a purpose is a parasite. They should die, along with the heretics...and the deformed babies, and those born with simple minds...and men who lie with men...and women who lie with women and anyone who does not conform to our rules.’

Cam balled his fists, clenching his teeth and looking away, staring hard at the floor beside him, away from Brioke who sat on his other side.

‘Perhaps we can reach a more agreeable solution’ Denzil began tentatively. ‘Not all gypsies are bad after, and we need the trade, I’m sure you can agree they are good for that at least?’

‘They need to be controlled at the very least’ Eden said. ‘We need to show them that just because they are wandering spirits they are not free from our laws.’

‘Perhaps we could just punish those that are unfaithful?’ Valeri said.

‘What exactly do you suggest?’ Agnus sighed wearily. ‘How many more need to die?’

‘Enough for the message to sink in.’

And then Brioke spoke up.

‘Perhaps we should let the prince decide. He *is* going to be king someday after all.’

Cam’s heart constricted in his chest and he suddenly tensed, sweat beginning to bead his forehead as he realised the others were watching him expectantly, all completely silent.

Those who had spoken in favour of punishing the gypsies had been those on the right hand of the council, the side that Brioke supported. Surely the correct answer to give was to support this side.

‘I...’ Cam stammered. ‘I believe they should be shown the correct...they...’ Cam closed his mouth, drawing a slow and steady breath. ‘I think the gypsies should be punished.’

‘How?’ Castello asked slowly, eyebrow raised.

Brioke watched Cam very closely.

Cam’s heart hammered in his chest so hard it began to hurt, and he suddenly felt panic.

‘I....I....’

Cam felt so afraid, blinking back the tears in his eyes.

‘I think they should die’ Cam said.

The members of the left hand were visibly disappointed, they sighed, shoulders slumped and looking to the floor.

‘If that is what you want’ Storin said, ‘then it will be done.’

Cam sat back in his seat, eyes wide and blinking furiously.

What have I done...what have I done? What am I doing?

‘Those that follow the customs of foreign lands and religions will be executed and made examples of’ Brioke spoke up. ‘Those that obey will be spared.’

When the meeting was over, Cam traversed the many stairs and corridors of the palace, heading to his room for some peace and quiet and doing so as fast as he could.

He felt sick, disgusted at himself and afraid, frightened of all the suffering that was happening, and so confused, always confused...

Cam entered his room several minutes later. He was about to head over to the window, when he heard movement behind him. Cam turned and was instantly struck across the head by a large heavy object. He stumbled and fell on his front, so hard was the force of the blow. Behind him Brioke dropped the heavy silver candle holder, striding over to him.

He had been waiting for Cam, hiding behind the door.

Cam was just pushing himself up gingerly, about to stand, his mind spinning in pain and confusion. He felt a hand upon his head then, forcing him back down to the ground, instantly he recognised Brioke’s touch.

‘Stay down’ Brioke growled in a low voice.

‘You’ve had me once today’ Cam sobbed, unable to keep his voice from breaking. ‘How many times? Isn’t this enough?’

‘The lesson needs to be reinforced’ Brioke sneered down at him. ‘I will have you as many times as I please. You are mine to command, and if you try to resist me, I will punish you for it.’

Cam’s body shook with sobs as he held his breath, gritting his teeth.

‘Stay down’ Brioke said to him again, whispering dangerously.

Cam didn’t move, he dared not. Brioke slowly withdrew his hand from the back of his head, waiting for a few seconds to see if Cam would comply, straightening again.

Cam remained still, lying on his front.

He then heard the sound of clothes moving, and a belt unbuckling. He took a deep and steady breath, balling his fists. And then Brioke was on top of him, his arms pressing down on his, pinning him to the ground with his weight.

Cam took another steady breath, and Brioke took his pleasure.

Sometime later, Brioke rose again, breathing heavily. He rose to stand, tidying himself up, as Cam sat up.

He looked at Brioke hard; Brioke stared back as he buckled up his belt again. He turned and walked away, exiting the room swiftly without a backwards glance as Cam stared after him.

When he was gone and the door shut again, Cam punched the ground with his fist, gritting his teeth and glaring at the door with tears of anger and hate in his eyes.

He rose and washed himself, then went to sit by the window, his book rested on his lap closed.

He did not touch it, only stared out through the window, through the warped glass he could see nothing but vague shapes and lights from the sky beyond.

Interlude start

‘Why doesn’t he help himself?’ Tiara said.

‘I think you’ll find that he can’t’ Venus replied as if it were obvious. Which it was.

Tiara turned her eyes back to the monitor, absentmindedly playing with the plague mask in her hands as she watched the young prince sitting by the window with the book on his lap untouched.

‘You know what I would do?’ Tiara said.

‘Please do tell me’ Venus replied dryly. ‘I am dying to know.’

‘I would fucking kill that son of a bitch.’

‘I’m sure you would’ Venus replied distractedly, glancing at his fingernails.

‘I mean it. It would be easy to do you know? Just hide a letter opener beneath your sleeve, wait for the opportune moment.....then *bam!*’ she slammed her fists on the controls. ‘Plunge that motherfucker right in his heart.’

‘I’m sure it’s not the easy.’

‘What’s so difficult about it?’ she asked dubiously.

‘If you were in *his* position...’ Venus glanced to the monitor. ‘He’s probably just frightened and living in fear every day. I doubt the idea has even occurred to him.’

‘More fool him’ Tiara replied heartlessly, placing the mask over her face. ‘If he lets himself continue to be a victim, then he has only himself to blame.’

‘Being a victim is not a choice’ Venus said flatly.

‘Being a victim *is* a choice. You can be a victim, or you can do something about it.’

She took the mask away from her face.

‘Only the strong make it in this world’ she breathed.

‘We could save him you know’ Venus said. ‘It would be more than easy for us.’

‘Why *would* we though? I mean...why should we?’ she smirked to herself. ‘The best way to help someone’ she said, ‘is to tell them to help themselves.’

Interlude end

Many days later

Cam sat on the windowsill in his room, staring through the warped glass at the sky beyond, as he had done many times before. He would sometimes spend hours staring through this window, and seeing nothing.

His mind was blank, and he was almost in a trance as he sat there.

The door to his bedroom opened suddenly, and Cam looked around to see his mother standing there.

Cam rose to his feet, placing the book he held to the side as Miranda let the door swing shut behind her.

‘Hello mother’ Cam said flatly. ‘What are you doing out of your room?’

Miranda narrowed her eyes at him. She moved forward gingerly, using a stick to walk. She went over to his bed, sitting down heavily upon it and turning to him.

‘Did you order the death of the gypsies?’

‘I...did’ Cam finished uncertainly.

‘Why?’

‘They...’ Cam began uncertainly. ‘They are...dangerous...they spread lies.’

Miranda stared at him sadly, wearing an expression of genuine distress and despair.

‘It breaks my heart to see what they’ve done to you, to see that they’ve gotten to you.’ She looked away then. ‘I failed.’

‘What do you want?’ Cam asked her shortly. ‘Why did you come here?’

‘You are my son’ Miranda spoke softly.

Cam stared at her, clearly not understanding.

Miranda turned to look at him then.

‘I care about you.’

‘No you don’t’ Cam answered immediately.

‘You must stop what they are doing to you’ Miranda instantly diverged. ‘You must stand up to them.’

‘You don’t understand.’

‘No *you* don’t understand’ Miranda said, heaving herself up again and standing, holding the walking stick firmly with a hand. ‘It’s one thing to sit behind these walls and make these things happen, but to see it with your own eyes...the gypsies are being slaughtered in their thousands...like animals.’ She fixed him with a cold stare. ‘If you were to see the pain and suffering in their faces as their families were torn apart...babies thrown from buildings to their deaths, men being forced to dig their own graves, women being forced to chose which of their loved ones should die first.....to hear about this is one thing, but just imagine for a moment....*being* there, and *seeing* it for yourself.’

She fell silent for a few moments, letting her words sink in.

‘The gypsies cause us harm’ Cam said finally. ‘Their deaths...will mean...for the rest of us....we will be safer.’

Miranda shook her head sadly at him.

‘You’re being controlled. Don’t you see? If you don’t stand up against the council...thousands more will die, and millions will suffer.’

Cam stared at her, mouth half open as if wishing to speak, but unsure of what to say.

‘I....’ he uttered then. ‘I....’ he drew a steady breath. ‘....I fear them’ he breathed.

‘Make yourself strong.’

‘How?’

‘Find it in yourself’ Miranda told him. ‘The weak die. Life is hard, and if you are not strong, then *you* will suffer too.’ She drew a slow breath, her body trembling slightly, though she hardly seemed to notice. ‘Only the strong make it in this world’ she said to him. ‘Nothing lives forever, and in the end, everything dies. It’s your job to live a good life’ she said, ‘and to do right by those around you, because your actions affect so many people.’

She turned from him, hobbling across the room and towards the door again. She opened it a crack as she slipped through, and Cam saw through the door, standing in the corridor was his brother. Luke caught his gaze for just a moment, turning away again and taking his mother by the arm, helping to support her, as they walked away.

The door swung shut again.

Cam turned sharply away from the door once he was alone again, gritting his teeth and balling his fists. He let out a cry of fury, punching the wall hard.

He stepped back, cradling his hand to him, chest rising and falling.

He was angry, so angry, and sick and tired of being afraid all the time, never knowing what the next day might bring, never knowing when he would be attacked again, and the confrontations with his brother as he was forced to push him away...

It was all too much.

‘I don’t know what normal is’ Cam said to himself as tears spilled down his cheeks, ‘but I know that *this* isn’t it.’

Luke helped to walk his mother back to her room, and this was where she stayed, after that, he was alone again.

Luke sat on the steps in his home, absentmindedly carving into a block of wood. He was carving a depiction of roses and vines into the flat side of the wood.

He had been doing this for hours now, just to pass the time.

These last few years had been so desperately lonely for him. Without his brother, there were few people now he could speak to, and even fewer who actually cared for him, and even less still who loved him. He would often spend hours at a time, even in the years that had passed, thinking about Cam, wondering about him, and trying in his head to solve the riddle that was his brother. But as hard as he tried, he saw no solution to him.

He wanted to help Cam, but Cam would only push him away, and it was hard to help someone who resisted to be helped.

Luke had tried hard over the years, but slowly he was giving up.

Now he had become bitter.

His days were boring and his life had become meaningless. Cam, though Luke was certain that he hated it, was busy most of the time preparing for the day where he would become king. Not but two years from now.

Cam was kept busy, and the council spent a lot of time teaching him.

Brainwashing him.

Luke in years gone by was once included in these lessons, but once the council became more set as the years passed in separating the twins, Luke had been forgotten altogether. He didn't know what to do. Not only was the council doing their best to separate the brothers and keep them apart, but Cam was pushing him away also. Luke felt so disheartened and lost and helpless. He wanted to help his brother, but he didn't know how. He wanted to help his brother, thinking of how deep the council had dug their claws into him, how much he was being torn in different directions by the council, and being forced to carry this burden that he was sure Cam did not want to bear.

Luke was distracted briefly as a figure spoke to him. So caught up as he dwelt on his thoughts, he barely registered her until she stopped beside him.

'The council wouldn't like you doing that.'

He lifted his head at the voice, pausing. He saw standing beside him a servant, she had been walking up the stairs when she noticed what he was doing.

It was the roses he had carved that she referred to. Luke knew that the council believed that a prince should act a very specific way, and showing any interest in anything that might be considered feminine, to them was seen as weakness.

'I don't care what the council thinks' Luke replied darkly, bowing his head and returning to the carving. 'They don't care about me anyway. They only care about my brother...I am not important.'

'Now I'm sure that isn't true.'

Luke raised his head again to her.

'Isn't there some work you should be doing?' he asked her.

'I'm sorry my lord' she bowed submissively, remembering her place. She made to leave, pausing for a moment. 'Sylvia is unwell today' the servant girl told him turning back.

'Perhaps you should pay her a visit.'

She bowed to him again, before leaving swiftly, jogging up the stairs.

Sylvia.

His old tutor.

She was the one person in the world now he could confide in, the one person who would listen, besides his own mother. He would even go so far as to say she loved him, and he thought that he might love her in return. It was strange, but he wasn't sure.

She had been old when the boys were first taught by her, and many years had passed since then. Now she was reaching the end of her life, and Luke knew she would not be around for much longer. Her health was deteriorating, her eyesight was failing, and she was becoming confused and struggled to eat. Now she was skinny and weak, and could no longer leave her room without assistance. It was hard enough for her to leave her chair nowadays.

Luke entered her room a short time later to find it dark inside. He closed the door quietly behind him, though he needn't have bothered, there wasn't much that Sylvia could hear nowadays.

He approached the chair slowly where she sat; walking around it and touching her hand gently to let her know that he was there.

She jumped slightly.

'It's alright' Luke spoke loudly to her, but in a gentle voice. 'It's only me.'

'Oh' she sighed, leaning back in her chair and relaxing again. 'Luke, thank gods it's just you.'

'It's ok' Luke smiled sadly at her, pulling up a chair beside hers. 'I'm here...'

Chapter Eleven

It was many weeks later that it took for Miranda to get some of her strength back. She no longer needed a stick to walk, and she no longer needed her son around to help support her, and for this she was grateful. Things had even gone so far for her to even feel safe leaving her floor. Now, she walked the corridors with pride.

'I won't let you beat me down' she had said over and over again to herself, 'I won't allow myself to lose to you.'

This had become her mantra; it was what had helped her become strong again these past few weeks.

On this morning she strode down the corridors, dressed in dark clothes. She passed one of the council members by chance along the way.

'My lady' the man said as she approached. 'What a surprise to see you after all this time.'

'Shove it Tarrant' Miranda told him without a pause. She stopped then, turning to face him properly now. 'I hope all of you die' she told him plainly. 'I hate all of you, you are nothing but poison. I know what you did to me.'

She turned on her heel and marched away without another pause, not even waiting for his reaction.

She came to her first flight of stairs, staring down at them reluctantly.

'Not these fucking stairs again' she sighed, gazing about her, 'I forgot how many there were...'

She began the long arduous trek down through the palace to the lower levels, reaching the ground floor, where she was met with her servant in the kitchens.

‘Here’ her new handmaiden said to her, handing her a dark hooded cloak. ‘The way out back is clear.’

‘No guards?’ Miranda queried.

‘They left half an hour ago’ the handmaiden replied as Miranda put the cloak on and raised the hood over her head. ‘You had best be swift however’ she said. ‘I don’t know when they will be back.’

Miranda nodded briskly, slipping through the servant’s door and outside into the garden. Here she used a rope and grappling hook to climb over the wall, landing heavily on the other side.

There were people in the street just beyond the wall, they gave her strange stares as she remained where she had fallen, kneeling in the dirt, body hunched over as she waited for the pain to subside.

She rose at last, wobbling slightly. She glanced back up at the wall, seeing the servant’s head peering over the top. The handmaiden would wait for her to return, and keep a look out. She had promised.

‘Thank you’ Miranda whispered back to her, before the servant’s head vanished, back behind the walls of the palace.

‘Miss’ spoke a man approaching her. ‘Are you alright?’

She instantly whipped out a knife, pointing it at him. She knew of the streets, she knew how dangerous it could be out here, a place where the strong would prey on the weak. It was just like everywhere really.

‘Stay back’ she hissed venomously at him. ‘I don’t need your help. Touch me and I’ll kill you.’

He backed away sharply, and she flicked the knife back, hiding it again beneath her cloak.

She began to walk, moving swiftly, she traversed the maze that was the city.

She knew her destination, knew her path and went without pause. Miranda reached the place minutes later, a dingy building, unremarkable in every single way, which made it the perfect place for thieves and mercenaries and veterans to meet. This is where she had met Tim all those years ago, back in the days when she didn’t have to sneak out of the palace in secret.

She opened the small door at the side of the building, stepping through quickly. Inside was a bar filled with burly dangerous looking men who were drinking and gambling. A barmaid ran back and forth with drinks and taking orders, and behind the bar itself there stood an older gentleman, leaning forwards upon the rotting wood with his chin resting in his palm. He stared down at an open book and seemed to be writing calculations.

Miranda narrowed her eyes on seeing him. She approached.

‘Bar master?’

The older gentleman blinked up at her, straightening.

‘Yes?’

‘I need assistance.’

‘Of what sort?’ the bar master droned. ‘You look too old to be whoring....no offense...’ he added lazily.

‘I am the queen.’

‘The queen has not been seen in years’ the bar master sighed wearily. ‘I don’t have time to waste’ he said, returning his attention back to his book.

‘I am the queen’ Miranda said again.

‘The queen committed suicide after the death of her husband.’

‘Are those the rumours?’

The bar master straightened again, looking at her closely.

‘My name is Miranda. My husband was the late king Carl and my sons are the princes Luke and Cam.’

Her hand went to her chest then, where a fabulous blue stone shone, part of the crest that was her family’s and woven into the dress.

‘My lady?’ the bar master gasped. ‘My...queen.... You’re...alive?’

Miranda drew her cloak tight, concealing the blue stone again.

‘I am who I say I am’ Miranda said. ‘But...you could hardly call me a queen nowadays, my powers disintegrated the moment my husband died and that absurd council took control.’

‘I’m sorry to hear-’

‘No you’re not’ Miranda finished. ‘Let’s cut the pleasantries. I came here for a reason.’

‘Of course’ the bar master fumbled. ‘What do you need?’

‘Men’ Miranda told him, ‘and protection.’

‘Protection?’

‘For myself...and my sons, especially the one who is destined to become king.’

‘Cam?’ the man mumbled. ‘Yes...of course, follow me.’

The bar master led her through the building and to a small courtyard out the back. Here they could be alone. Here the two of them spoke.

‘I have access to plenty of money’ Miranda told him. ‘I need men to protect me, and I need to learn how to protect myself if they are not there to do so.’

‘You want to learn how to fight?’

‘Yes’ Miranda spoke quietly. ‘This is something I perhaps should have done a long time ago.’ She raised her hands before her, holding them together, feeling them shaking slightly. ‘I don’t know yet if it’s already too late for me...’

Luke sat on the edge of his bed, resting with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, his mind fraught with worry.

He was losing Sylvia, he knew this. It would only be a few days now until she died, and after that....

He let out a heavy sigh, breathing slowly.

There was suddenly a knock on the door. Luke opened his eyes, straightening up.

He hesitated, staring at the door for a moment, before rising and marching over to it.

He opened the door, seeing the figure standing in the hallway before him. It was the servant who had spoken to him before when he was carving roses into that block of wood.

‘What do you want?’ Luke asked her shortly.

‘You didn’t come to the dining hall for your meal’ the servant replied, holding a tray in her hands before her. ‘I...thought I’d bring you your food....in case you were hungry....’

‘Who told you to do this?’ Luke asked her flatly.

‘Nobody’ she mumbled. ‘I...was worried about you...I thought that...I should do this.’

Luke narrowed his eyes, pausing for a moment as he considered her, feeling a slight suspicion. But when he could think of no reason not to let her in, he stepped back, letting the door swing open.

The servant entered shyly, placing the tray on a nearby table and turning to him.

Luke stood by the open door, waiting for her to leave, when she didn't, he closed the door, the cold draft howling down the corridor and around his ankles instantly ceased.

'I'm sorry' the servant said, hugging herself and glancing towards the tray. 'It may be a bit cold now. It took me a while to climb all the stairs to reach your room.'

'Why did you bring it to me?' Luke asked her.

'Because you didn't come to the dining hall' the servant repeated.

'So?'

'I thought you might be hungry.'

'Why would you care if I was?' Luke asked in a cold voice.

The servant raised her head. 'I was worried about you.'

'And why do you care about me?'

'You're the prince.'

'So?'

'Well...I mean....you need to be cared for.'

'Why?'

'Because you are a prince.'

Luke sighed heavily, his patience growing thin.

'What do you want?' Luke snapped at her. 'Why are you still here?'

The servant hesitated, staring at him. She moved closer to him, reaching forwards to touch his face, running her fingers over his lips. Luke glared at her, frowning at the touch.

'You're so handsome' she whispered.

Luke felt her thumb run across his skin.

A moment of silence passed between them, a moment of hesitation.

And then the servant stepped closer to him again, leaning forward and kissing him, running her hands around his body and holding him.

Luke felt her lips on his, lifting his hands as she kissed him.

He suddenly grabbed her roughly, pulling her into a tight hold as he kissed her back. He pushed her back into the room, breaking away from the kiss to shove her back onto the bed.

The servant let out a gasp as Luke descended upon her, pulling at the lace at the front of her dress as she reached up to him, clawing at his shirt. He pushed her further up the bed, running his hand up her dress and lifting her skirt so that he could reach her. The servant grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling him down to her so that she could kiss him again. She ran her fingers through his jet black hair, hearing the sound of him unbuckling his belt.

He parted her legs.

She gasped suddenly as Luke pushed himself into her, moaning in pleasure and balling the sheets in her fists as he pressed deep inside. He grabbed her by the hair, pulling her head back and biting her neck, moving his lips down to her chest and sinking his teeth in as she grasped onto his muscular arms painfully.

Luke quickened his pace until he climaxed, panting heavily and leaning over her. The servant stared up at him, drawing heavy breaths, her body in a hot flush.

Luke relaxed his body, releasing her from his grasp as he let out a sigh, pulling out. He turned from her, straightening his clothes and redressing, as the servant behind him began to tie up her dress.

Luke sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her, breathing slowly.

‘Get out.’

The servant glanced up tentatively, moving off the bed she made her way quietly to the door.

‘Wait’ Luke called out suddenly, stopping her in the doorway.

The servant turned back to him.

‘What is your name?’ Luke asked.

The servant hesitated for a moment, as if reluctant to say. But then she finally answered.

‘It’s Bethany’ she said.

Luke said no more, and Bethany bowed her head after a few seconds, turning back to the door and stepping out into the corridor, closing the door behind her.

Miranda held the sword in her hands, raising it up high before her. Her sparring partner facing her, was a young soldier.

‘Are you ready?’ he asked her.

She tightened her hands around the hilt of the wooden sword, feeling her arms already beginning to shake, her legs feeling weak.

I must be strong she chanted to herself over and over. *I must be strong.*

The soldier before her tilted his head. The bar master stood mutely watching nearby, leaning against the wall of the small courtyard.

Miranda sensed the young soldier hesitate, seeing her weakness clearly, but Miranda gritted her teeth in determination. The soldier looked for a moment as if he were about to question her, but then changed his mind.

He stepped forward, and Miranda moved to lunge.

It took only a few seconds for Miranda to stumble, though nothing had tripped her, frustrated and angry she threw her sword down.

‘Fuck! Fuck!’

‘I’ve seen this poison before’ the young soldier said, stepping back and holding his wooden sword in both hands. ‘Do not be disheartened, you’re lucky to be alive.’

‘If you could call this alive’ Miranda hissed. ‘I call it a mere existence.’

‘It’s still more than some have.’

She turned to him, meeting his eyes.

‘You won’t be able to fight’ he said to her, ‘not anymore, not the way you are now, but...there are still many here who are willing to protect you, and not just for coin.’

‘What?’ Miranda gasped in shock. ‘What are you saying?’

‘There are many still loyal to the old king’ the bar master spoke up from the edge of the courtyard. ‘We’re not blind, we know what’s going on and we know how corrupt the council has become. There’s probably not much we can do, but if you need our help, then we will be there. Remember, it’s more than just you who suffer because of them. The boy’ the bar master indicated the young soldier Miranda had been sparring with, ‘he lost his entire family, because they followed the wrong religion.’

‘I would see them all dead’ the young soldier snarled. ‘I would give my own life if need be...in order to protect the princes, and see them on the throne.’ He paused, drawing a slow breath to calm his anger. ‘I want to see this country ruled by its rightful bloodline, not these leaches that call themselves the council.’

Miranda smiled. And then she began to laugh, tears running down her cheeks.

I am not all alone after all! There are still people who fight for the greater good. There are still people who see this evil...even after all this time...

It was some days later, when Luke met Bethany in the hallway again.

‘It’s good to see you again’ she beamed at him.

‘Is it?’

‘You don’t have to be so cold’ she told him sadly. When he didn’t reply, she went on. ‘There are people here who care for you, you know?’ when he still didn’t speak, she continued, changing tact. ‘You can have me’ she told him quietly, ‘...if you want, whenever you want.’ She bowed her head. ‘I am only a servant after all. I’m supposed to serve you.’

Cam appeared in the corridor then by chance, walking towards them on one of his many wanders about the palace. Luke’s expression immediately soured as he saw Cam glaring at him.

Cam jerked his head away from his brother angrily, storming down the corridor and disappearing from sight around the next corner.

‘He’s always so angry’ Bethany said to Luke in a mumble. ‘It makes me nervous to be around him.’

‘Follow me’ Luke told her shortly, marching briskly down the corridor and heading to his own room.

Bethany scurried after him, struggling to keep up with his wide strides.

She followed him into his bedroom. Luke closed the door after them and turned to face her.

She stood uncertainly before him for a moment, looking so sweet and timid, wondering what he would do to her.

He couldn’t resist her.

She tensed suddenly as he rushed towards her, closing the gap between them fast as he grabbed her, his roving hands tightening around her waist and jerking her head back as he kissed her deeply, tasting her.

She moaned as he pushed her against the wall, fighting to get free of him so that she could draw a breath.

She gasped as his lips parted from hers, and he groaned, biting her skin along her neck and shoulders. Bethany trembled as he hurt her, bruising her tender skin.

He pushed his waist forwards, pressing his hips against hers. Bethany turned her head to the side as she felt his erection against her midriff, feeling suddenly a little intimidated as his tall figure towered over her smaller frame.

She stopped his assault for a moment, simply holding her. Bethany felt his breath against her skin.

He stepped back then, pulling her with him as they moved over to the bed.

He pushed her back against it, advancing on her.

‘Wait...’ she gasped.

‘No’ he breathed heavily back to her. ‘I can’t hold back any longer...’

Both his hands ran quickly up her thighs beneath her skirt, pulling her pants down.

He parted her legs forcefully, hurting her muscles.

He bore down on her.

Bethany threw her head back, arching her back as she felt his tongue touch her where it shouldn’t have. Her body began to tremble, and her breath came in shallow rasps.

She looked down at him, seeing only his head bowed, and his hands resting on her thighs, his nails digging painfully into her skin, holding her, legs apart.

He stopped, raising his head and looking up at her.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, crawling up the bed and looming over her.

He straightened up then, only briefly to unbuckle his belt.

Bethany watched him with growing anxiety, unable to tear her eyes away.

Her breath caught in her throat as he reached down to kiss her again, one hand grasping her hair, and the other...

She drew a slow gasp and a moan as he forced himself in, doing so with no tenderness. He cared not for her feelings.

She grasped onto his smooth chest firmly. Her cheeks were flushed, and her expression pained as he had his way.

He lasted longer than he did before, breathing heavily; sweat beaded his brow and chest.

He turned her onto her front to finish her off, pinning her down against the bed and trapping her, holding her with his weight.

He came inside her, his body relaxed as he let go of her, pulling out soon after.

A short while later they lay on the bed side by side breathing heavily. Bethany rose from the bed, intending to leave, but Luke suddenly grabbed her, pulling her back down.

‘Stay with me’ he said.

The servant lay back on the bed, holding the sheets to her, protecting herself against the chill.

‘Why do you give yourself to me’ Luke asked her after a time.

‘I am just a servant’ Bethany said. ‘

‘But why did you choose me?’

‘Because....’ Bethany said, ‘because.....I love you.’

Luke turned to face her.

‘Don’t say that.’

‘Why not?’ she asked him.

‘You don’t even know me.’

‘Do you believe in love at first sight?’

‘No.’

Bethany snuggled up to him, Luke suddenly felt strange at the act.

‘I’ve been watching you for a while’ Bethany said in a mumble. ‘I’ve wanted you for ages.’

She closed her eyes, as if preparing to sleep. ‘I’ve loved you for a long time now.’

Luke didn’t understand her, but thought it was strange, that despite the way he had acted towards her, throwing her snide and harsh comments and giving her orders, she had still loved him. Or at least that is what she told him.

This isn't love.....this isn't love.....

And then he thought of Cam.

Does he still feel for me? Luke thought, holding Bethany to him. *Does my brother still care about me?*

Cam sat on the floor of the corridor, leaning back against the balustrade with the book on his lap. Here he had been reading for hours, until he heard voices coming from the floor below.

Cam's attention drifted from the story, and he raised his head.

Glancing behind him, he saw a small group.

They were the children of the council members. Some were orphans, but all had decided to remain here.

Cam closed his book, putting it aside. He turned now to watch the figures below him.

There were boys and girls, all in their early teens. They moved in a group, several were clinging to one another as they walked. Cam heard their laughter, saw the smiles upon their faces, and felt a tug within his heart, a deep pang of loneliness and isolation. He watched the group move below him with dead eyes. A tear ran down his cheek.

Two member of the group broke off from the rest, they moved together in a kiss, holding one another close.

Cam watched them.

The girl giggled, moving away then. The boy smiling widely, followed after her.

Cam stared off into nothingness. He turned away, taking his book carefully and rising to his feet.

He paused for a moment, before walking slowly down the corridor and away.

A short time later; and Luke was sitting beside Sylvia who lay in her bed.

'I just don't know what to do' Luke was saying. 'I still care for him so dearly, he is my brother...he's all I have left. Father is gone...and a mother...' he trailed off. 'Who can you rely on in this world if not your own brother?'

'It's not an easy thing' Sylvia replied to him in a quiet voice. 'Just think of what your brother must be going through.'

'I try to help him' Luke pleaded, voice breaking. He balled his fists. 'I *want* to help him...more than anything....but he only ever pushes me away...sometimes I think he hates me.'

'Did you ever think that maybe he was pushing you away to protect you?' Sylvia asked him.

Luke hesitated at that.

'But...' Luke began uncertainly. 'He's my brother....I would suffer any hardship in order to protect him.'

Sylvia smiled at this. 'Perhaps he too thinks the same.'

Luke faltered.

'I believe that Cam is stronger than any of us knows, including himself' Sylvia told him. 'I believe.....things will all work out in the end.'

'Oh Sylvia' Luke sighed unhappily. 'Do you really mean that?'

'It is what I truly believe' she said to him. 'Do you remember when you two were children?'

‘We were never apart’ Luke nodded at the memories. ‘Those were the good days...when father was alive.....and I didn’t feel anxious *all the time*.’

‘I believe that he still loves you’ Sylvia smiled. ‘He is your brother...I doubt he has forgotten those days either.’

Luke smiled silently at this. He held Sylvia’s hands in his, grasping lightly as he sat by her bed.

It was the very next day; that Sylvia died.

Luke sat on the steps outside her room, crying into his arms, knees pulled up to his chest.

It was horrible, all so horrible, to be pushed away so viciously by Cam, and to lose now the only person in the world who had seemed to care for him, the only person he could talk to, save his mother.

But there was one other person it seemed in the world he had.

Bethany came to him, sitting beside him on the steps and hugging him as he cried.

His hand came up and he grasped her by the arm.

‘Bethany....’ He whispered. ‘Thank you...’

It was only a few weeks after that, when she left the palace for good, having to return to her family in the north because of strife. Luke had begged her not to go, had pleaded, telling her that it was dangerous, even going so far as to say that her family might already be dead. Hundreds already were after all. But she would not listen. She loved her family, they were very close and she had not seen them in an age.

And she so left; and Luke was alone again.

On one night, after yet another night of restless sleep, Luke lost his temper. Screaming in fury and throwing things about the room, breaking everything he could in his anger, unable to take anymore.

And then noticed his window, the window that held glass that was warped, so that nothing could be seen in or out.

He grabbed a heavy candleholder from the floor and threw it as hard as he could at the window, shattering the glass.

Luke stood there for the longest time, chest rising and falling as he breathed heavily, his hot skin chilled by the cool breeze that came from the outside world.

He had calmed now, all the energy was gone from him.

He fell to his knees, and cried into his hands.

Cam sat in the wide corridor now, completely immersed in his book and the fabulous world within. The story he read now was about giant creatures made of metal and steam, creatures which could have been called animal. They destroyed all in their path, and polluted everything around them. The only man to stand up to them, was not a hero, but a normal person, some might have called him a nobody. Together with his pet dragon, they fought the iron beasts alone, destroying them and bringing peace to their world again. It was a happy ending.

Cam closed the book slowly, staring off into nothing. He sat frozen on the steps in silence for many minutes, the book resting on his lap.

His trance was only broken when the door at the top of the steps opened. Cam's head snapped up, and he stared with wide eyes towards his tutor.

'Come here' Eden said to him.

Cam rose obediently, obeying his command and jogging up the stairs towards him. The book he had carried he left behind on the steps.

They walked for a short distance until they came to a mighty hall.

'Two years' Eden said to him. 'Two years from now, will be your coronation. You will be crowned king, in this hall' he said turning and indicating the great hall around them, a hall that could hold hundreds of people. 'It will be a big day for you' Eden continued. 'I will tell you what needs to be done.'

He stepped forward, moving through the vast the hall, Cam following a step behind.

Their footfalls were softened upon the red carpet, that reached from the double doors at the entrance, all the way to the alter on the far side.

Cam glanced nervously to the tall windows that surrounded them. The glass here could not be seen through, it was stained many different bright and beautiful colours, and told the stories of their religion.

There was Micro, the first, who gave life to the earth. There was Faeroe, with his fox-like ears, lizard tail and spiked disc on his back, a fighting god, the stained glass depiction of him was a magnificent and dramatic one indeed.

'You will be dressed appropriately' Eden began as they continued their swift march to the other side of the long hall. 'All of the most important people in the kingdom will be here' he continued.

Cam continued to stare at the stained glass around him. He looked to his other side, seeing more depictions of the gods and goddesses that ruled over them. There was Ludus, in her beautiful blue crown of feathers, the young Filis, a six winged boy, Zeana with her great curved horns. Kachi, maiden of the sea, around her scaly tail were wrapped several eels. And lastly, there was Ezla, the god who grew out of the rocks, the one that has imprisoned Micro for eighty years for the love he felt for her, causing an eighty year long winter.

These were the seven gods which they worshiped.

'Here is where you will stand' Eden told Cam, stopping at the head of the hall and turning towards him.

They stood elevated above the rest of the hall; the short flight of steps allowed them greater height.

'You will address the people' Eden said, 'and speak your piece. You will bow to the holy man, he will place the crown upon your head, and you will stand tall...as king.' Eden paused.

'Do you understand?'

'Yes' Cam said shortly.

'You will say the following lines. *I am Cameron, now your king, and I swear under the seven gods above, to be a just and honest king, loyal to his people, and always kind.* Repeat what I just said.'

'I am Cameron, now your king, and I swear under the seven gods above, to be a just and honest king, loyal to his people, and always kind'

‘Say it with conviction. Speak loudly so that everyone can hear you, and don’t falter.’

‘Yes.’

‘The council members will be standing here’ Eden said indicating an area off to one side, ‘they will be watching over and guiding you. Your brother will be standing there, the holy men will be standing there, the lords and ladies there...’

Eden talked for quite some time, drilling the information into him. When this was all done, Cam left the hall, pausing at the bottom of the steps to pick up his book.

He made his way back to his bedroom, intending to read.

But before he could reach it, a voice broke into him, destroying everything.

‘Cam! I want to see you in my office.’

Cam stopped suddenly. Jaw tense. He glared back down the corridor at Brioke who stood in the doorway of the office, waiting for him.

Cam took a deep breath, then turned and walked back, heading towards the office and dropping the book on the floor as he went. Brioke opened the door wider for him as he approached, smiling at him as he stepped in.

‘There’s a good lad’ he said.

Some time passed.

‘You’re a good boy you know that Cam?’ Brioke was saying as he looked in the mirror, straightening his clothes.

Cam didn’t answer, only stared off into nothing. He sat on Brioke’s bed now, naked beneath the sheets that covered him, leaning against the wall behind.

‘You could smile a little more though’ he added.

Cam still said nothing.

‘Be sure to cover up that bruise before you leave here’ Brioke went on. ‘We wouldn’t want anyone noticing and asking questions now would we?’

Silence.

‘Cam?’ Brioke said sternly turning to him. ‘Did you hear me?’

‘Yes master’ Cam droned.

‘And you will hide that bruise before you leave here?’

‘Yes master.’

‘And cheer the fuck up.’

‘Yes master.’

Brioke turned back to the mirror, pleased now. ‘Good’ he said happily. ‘Now I must go, I’ve much to do.’

He approached the bed before heading to the door.

‘Cam’ he said slowly.

Cam lifted his head.

Brioke leant forwards, taking Cam’s head in his hands and holding as he kissed him deeply. Cam cringed inwardly as he felt Brioke’s tongue inside of him.

Brioke leant back, looking Cam deep in the eyes. Cam stared miserably back, utterly silent.

Brioke straightened up and moved away. He left the room without another word, leaving Cam alone at last.

Cam lay down on the bed, holding the sheets to him and curling up.

Sometime later he rose, moving over to the dresser and picking up the makeup pot, painting the flesh-coloured paste around his blackened eye. When he was done, it looked as if there was nothing there.

He dressed, went to his own room to wash himself, dressed again in fresh clothes, and then went to the tower, the only place in the building where he could see the outside world.

He sat on the wall, staring down at the drop below him, wondering what it would be like then to fall through the air.

He wondered what it would be like...what it would *feel* like.....to hit the ground.

It would be quick he thought to himself as his heart raced at the thought, as he began to seriously consider it. *Then never again would I*

And then he noticed something that wasn't there before, a young woman moving through the garden below him.

He frowned down at her as he watched, and wondered for a moment what she was doing there and how she got in.

He stared at her for a moment, seeing her red hair.

And then his heart jolted as he suddenly recognised her. His eyes widened, and he drew a slow gasp.

'....*Lucy...?!*'

Cam rushed through the palace, desperately trying to find a way out to reach her.

I have to speak to her...I have to...

He could not get to the gardens from the tower, which was the only place from the palace he could see the outside world.

He would have to break a window to escape, and he would do so...so desperate was he to see her again.

But when he reached the ground floor and ran out into the palace gardens, he found that she was already gone.

Cam slowly returned to the palace feeling deeply disappointed, frustrated and unhappy. Stepping over the broken glass he climbed gingerly back through the window, moving carefully so as not to cut himself on the edges.

He returned to his room and took his book out to read alone in silence.

Miranda raised her hood, marching through the streets with her head down and face hidden. On her person she carried several knives among other things, such as poison and several smoke bombs.

She was a woman alone after all, and she knew better than most how dangerous the streets were.

She had left the palace behind her; it stood there looming over her like a monument to her suffering. She saw it not as the beautiful structure that many saw it as, but as a horror, where she had spent the majority of her life living miserably.

But as she came to think of it, her life with her parents when she was young wasn't that great either.

She escaped the palace now, using a secret tunnel that had been dug on her order. Only she and two other people knew about it, the two people who had dug the tunnel. Even Miranda wasn't sure herself what they were. Mature men they were, mercenaries or thieves perhaps, who knew? She didn't ask and they didn't tell. That was what she liked about those men, they didn't ask questions, they just got on with their job, and were more than happy to obey her orders. She did pay them handsomely after all. But it was not just the money that compelled them to follow her word, or at least, that's what they told her. Money of course would sweeten any deal.

But now she had to leave the palace herself, as she needed to see someone who would not come to her.

A man called Incognito.

It was a dank and filthy place he lived, at least that is how it looked from the outside, inside however, it was quite beautiful.

Miranda came to the house. Its grey walls were streaked with black filth the rain had washed from the building itself. Its windows were clouded from the inside by a strange substance, and nothing could be seen through them.

Miranda stood at the front steps of the building, knocking loudly on the door, doing so hard enough to make her knuckles hurt.

Seconds later, the door opened.

Miranda stood there as the man called Incognito surveyed her for a moment, before stepping back and allowing her to enter.

He closed the door after her and Miranda lowered her hood.

'I'm so glad to see you again' she told him.

'As I am glad to see you' he told her. He cupped her face, kissing her gently.

Miranda sighed as he stepped back from her.

'I only wish that were true' she said to him.

'You think I don't truly love you?'

'I don't know what to think of you' Miranda answered. 'I don't even know your true name...'

He moved away from her and into the room, sitting upon the thick and luxurious sofa, leaning back and breathing heavily.

The room around them was brilliantly decorated and comfortable; it was far more homely than the palace Miranda had come from.

'What's on your mind?' Incognito asked her, getting to the point.

Miranda turned to face him, the hem of her long black cloak swaying about her ankles as she turned.

'I plan to leave the palace for good' she told him.

'Oh?'

'Do you love me?' Miranda asked him out of the blue.

'Yes' he replied. 'I truly care for you.'

‘I can only hope that’s true’ she said. She bowed her head, weaving her fingers together before her, before lifting her chin again. ‘My life...’ Miranda began, ‘I am in danger every day. I want to get away from the palace...I want to live a normal life.’

‘Don’t we all.’

‘I want to share a life with you’ Miranda said. ‘Would you accept me? Would you accept such a thing?’

‘I would’ he told her solemnly. ‘I love you Miranda, and I want to be with you.’

She lowered her arms, allowing them to hang limp by her sides.

She moved up to Incognito, bending over him and kissing him.

He rose then, lifting her swiftly in his arms and carrying her light frame upstairs to the bedroom.

Afterwards, they lay together on the bed in one another’s arms.

‘Why can I not know your true name?’ Miranda asked him.

‘I have no true name’ he told her, holding her close. ‘I was an orphan. I passed from one home to another throughout my entire childhood. Throughout that time I was given different names. When I grew up and began to travel, I used a different name every place I visited. I am nobody, I am nothing.’

He drew another breath as if about to speak, but instead chose to remain silent.

Miranda rested her hand against his chest, hearing his heartbeat as she hugged him.

She pushed away slowly then, rising to her feet and beginning to get dressed.

‘My son will become king in two years’ Miranda spoke. ‘But even so, I doubt he will protect me. I’ve done what I can but...by the time Cam is nineteen...’ she broke off then, hugging herself. ‘I shudder to think what the council have already done to him.’

‘You are still willing to leave?’ Incognito asked her, ‘even if it means leaving your children behind?’

‘Yes’ Miranda answered quietly. ‘There is too much strife in this city. Too much suffering...too many supposed heathens being burned by the holy figures. The council already have too much power...I am afraid to stay...’ she pursed her lips. ‘The children are on their own now. I feel there is nothing I can do for them.’

‘When do you want to leave?’

Miranda was silent for a moment.

‘In a week’s time’ she answered at last. ‘I...I need time to think...’

He caught her hand as she made to leave.

‘I look forward to that time’ he said to her. ‘I want to be with you, and start a new life... *together*.....I might even choose a new name for myself, a proper one.’

She smiled at him.

‘I wish for that’ she whispered, ‘I do with all my heart.’ She smiled to him again. ‘I cannot wait to escape this city altogether and start over you. I want to forget my entire past...everything. I want it to be as if none of it ever happened.....only you.....’

She moved close to him again, embracing him in a deep kiss.

Cam sat on the stairs folding paper. Normally he would be reading, but he wasn’t in the mood at the moment, and so he found something else to do instead, and he was good at this. He had

folded several roses of different colours, several different birds, a whale, a seahorse, a cat, and several things he had only read about in his books. A blue dragon breathing fire, for which he had used red and orange paper, thin enough to see through. A winged mermaid made of several different pieces of paper coloured blues and greens. A chimera, a single creature made up of three, with the head of a dragon, a goat and a lion. This had been the most difficult.

Cam had quite a collection around him now, and was surrounded by these things. He had finished making them, and had run out of paper. He leant forward now, staring silently at them, glancing from one to the next, admiring them, admiring what he had done. He reached for the chimera, poking it with a finger and moving it slowly across the smooth floor, before turning it around to face the other way and moving it back.

Cam let out a heavy sigh, turning his attention away from it and hugging his knees.

He stared down the stairs to the floor below with eyes out of focus, his mind was far away. Beyond these walls he had been trapped behind, this palace, which to him was nothing more than a grand prison.

One of these days...I'm going to escape the capital altogether. I am going to run away...and never come back...or I will die...

Cam closed his eyes.

Either way...one day....I will get out...

He stayed where he was for many minutes, resting his chin on his knees with his eyes closed, until he heard a noise.

His heart skipped a beat and his eyes shot open. He tensed, hearing someone approaching.

Leaning to the side and gazing through the balustrade to the floor below, Cam spotted Brioke. But by the time Brioke came to the place where Cam had been sitting, all he found were origami creatures in a circle around where Cam had sat.

Cam was already long gone. He was safe for today, but Cam could not always get away from him. Brioke would always find him in the end.

On one particular morning, Cam was walking down the corridors heading to the dining hall for breakfast.

'Morning Cam' Brioke spoke softly, almost kindly, as he glided past the prince.

Cam who had hunched up and hugged himself at the sight of him, leant back against the wall, suddenly tense. Brioke had appeared so suddenly.

'M-morning' Cam said hastily.

'Come here' Brioke said, opening a nearby door and indicating Cam to go through it.

Cam did so automatically and without pause, without realising he was doing it.

The closing door.

It was what Cam feared the most. They would not be disturbed here.

He bit his tongue, heart racing as Brioke moved towards him. Cam knew something was about to happen.

Brioke stopped before him, Cam's breath caught in his throat.

'Did you break a window in the palace?'

'N-no!'

‘You're not lying to me are you?’

Cam’s stomach twisted and his heart constricted in his chest. He began to sweat as his mind went blank.

‘I am your master’ Brioke began, ‘am I not?’

‘You are’ Cam mumbled, ‘master’ he added hastily.

‘You know what will happen if you upset me?’ Brioke asked him, raising a hand slowly and caressing his face.

‘Yes master’ Cam whispered in a trembling voice. ‘I do.’

‘Never the less’ Brioke smiled cruelly, ‘let me reinforce the lesson.’

‘No please!’ he cried. *Anything but that.* He would rather Brioke kissed him, touched him, anything but the pain.

But he had learnt long ago that Brioke had his way.

Brioke would always have his way.

He grabbed Cam roughly by the hair and threw him hard back against the wall. Cam moaned in pain.

And then Brioke slapped him hard, again and again both sides of his face. Cam could do nothing to stop it, he didn’t dare even try. And then Brioke stopped suddenly.

Cam hung his head low, waiting, always waiting.

Brioke grabbed Cam by the throat, pulling him towards him then shoving him back against the wall. He balled his fist and drew back, punching Cam several times in the face, before hitting him once hard in the gut with all his might.

Cam slid down the wall, hunched over and holding himself in agony; face burning, stomach in pain. Brioke punched him again on the shoulder, forcing Cam to the floor, where he was most vulnerable. Brioke kicked him several times when he was down, his metal tipped boot causing so much pain and untold damage. But he was always careful where he hit him the hardest. Most of the injuries Brioke inflicted were places that could be hidden. Body, legs, arms...most of them.

Cam broke away from him, unable to stand it; he tried to crawl away, moaning in agony and fear.

‘Please....!’ He sobbed as he dragged himself across the floor. ‘...*I can’t take any more...!*’

Brioke followed him, standing over him he turned Cam over with a foot. Cam was rolled onto his back, trembling violently, battered and bruised he stared up helplessly at his master, arms curled up before him, hands before his face in a vain effort to protect himself.

With no effort at all, Brioke moved Cam’s arms out of the way, pressing a foot down on his throat. Cam instinctively grabbed his boot, gurgling as he fought for breath.

‘Never forget’ Brioke whispered dangerously down at him. ‘I *own* you.’

Cam gripped his boot harder with trembling hands, struggling to breathe.

‘I am your master’ Brioke continued, pressing his foot down further. ‘You do what I saw, whatever I say.’

Brioke pressed down harder.

‘Do you understand me?’

Cam continued to tremble, his whole body quivering, unable to breath, choking. After a few seconds he drew his hands back in submission, releasing his grip on Brioke’s boot.

Brioke smiled cruelly down at him.

‘Now you're learning.’

Broke stepped back, releasing Cam who instantly rolled onto his side, coughing violently. By the time Cam glanced up, Brioke was gone.

Hours later, after the pain had mostly ebbed away to nothing but dull throbs over his body, he went back to his room to apply makeup on his face to hide the bruising. Then he went to the dining hall.

It was empty, his mother and brother having eaten long ago and already left. Cam waited for his breakfast to be brought by the quiet servants, which it was shortly after his arrival.

Cam ate what he could, then left, heading to the tower. The one place in his home from which he could see the outside world. The one place in his home which he didn't hate.

He sat here for ages, just sitting and staring at the world around him. Despite how much he hated the palace, the view from this tower was always beautiful.

On one side could be seen the beach and open sea, where he and his brother once played together, and the cliffs and open plains where they had first met Auntie, the strange masked figure. It was a peaceful place, quiet and empty.

On the other side was the city, the capital, where the homes were built close together and it was always noisy, always crowded, always busy. The city was like a hive, never resting, not even at night, where the streets which may have seemed deserted at first, were in fact dominated by beautiful women, and shabby vagrants.

Cam moved forwards, leaning over the wall.

His attention shifted then, and his eyes looked down to the drop below.

He stared at the ground hard, fixated on the spot immediately below him.

His heartbeat began to quicken, as he leant forward again, gripping the wall of the balcony.

And then suddenly, his heart stopped in his chest. His breath was stolen away, as he saw...

‘...Lucy?’

Her hair was unmistakable, orange like the setting sun, and beautiful. She was gliding about the palace gardens now, going from tree to tree, picking the best fruit.

What are you doing here? Don't you know it's dangerous?

Cam left the tower, returning shortly after with a length of rope. He gazed about the gardens below him, desperately searching for her. But she was nowhere to be seen. Not now.

Undeterred, Cam tied the end of the rope to the railings by the door, throwing the coil over the balcony wall.

It's alright he reassured himself. *This is easy. You were always a good climber when you were young; it's a skill you never lose.*

At least that's what he told himself.

He acted quickly, not giving himself a chance to begin to doubt himself. He climbed over the wall, grasping the rope tightly with both hands, and began to climb carefully down.

As he neared the ground, he loosened his grip slightly, sliding down the rope and burning his hands. He landed on the ground hard, stumbling as he fell. He let go of the rope quickly and straightened. Cam craned his head back, looking to the top of the tower.

I can climb back he thought to himself. *Easy.*

He glanced about him then.

I'm out. Again. I'm out. He gritted his teeth in determination, fighting back the wave of sickness and fear that was rising in his chest. *I have to be quick.*

'Lucy...'

Cam hung back momentarily, clinging to the bushes in the garden and glancing about him cautiously to see if anyone else was around. If a guard was to find him, he would be escorted back to the palace.

And there was no way Brioke would not find out.

Cam balled his fists, swallowing the lump in his throat and pushing down his fear.

No he thought to himself. *I cannot falter now...*

Cam moved vigilantly through the garden, finding one of the smaller gates further away from the palace that was chained shut. He could not go through the front gate as it was guarded, and it was far too risky to even go near it, and so he searched for another way out. But this gate he found was locked tight, the chain was thick. There was no way of getting out through this way.

Cam sighed in frustration, running his fingers over the heavy chain. He glanced about him, and searched for another way. This took a long while; he wandered about the garden hoping to run into her and at the same time, keeping an eye out for any others, guards, gardeners or servants.

He had hoped to find Lucy. But she was gone already.

Cam searched, but he found no way out, and so he made his own.

Cam took a spade from one of the small sheds tucked away within the garden, and began to dig.

It took him a long while to dig a hole large enough for him to fit through. It was hard work, his body ached with the old bruises he had received, and old pains he had suffered. He gingerly moved the dirt from the hole, making a small pile beside the hole, hiding the dirt within nearby foliage. When he could no longer use the spade to dig, unable to reach far enough, he got on his knees and used his hands.

After a while, he looked to the sky above him which was beginning to darken, its hue turning a deep orange. His heart skipped in his chest as he realised how late it was.

'How did Lucy get in here?' Cam mumbled to himself in frustration. 'How...?'

He looked down again, realising he did not have time now to leave the palace grounds to go find her. It would be dark soon, and he would be expected to make an appearance at dinner.

Resentfully he put the spade away, returning to the base of the tower he had come from to climb the rope back to the top. When he reached the top of the tower, he wound the rope carefully back and neatly placed it to the side.

He walked down the spiral stairs of the tower, his clothes flecked with dirt, with mud caked beneath his nails and over his hands and knees.

He quickly went to his room to wash and change, sat with his mother and brother at dinner, then went to bed.

First thing the next morning, he woke as early as he dared, using the rope to climb down the tower and into the garden once again. He slipped through the hole he had dug for himself, crawling beneath the wall over the dirt, and was at last free to wander the city at the before his home.

The palace loomed behind him as he made his way swiftly forwards. He wore his oldest clothes, still standing out a little, though far less than he would have if he had worn his regular clothes. The fine velvet clothes woven with jewels he had taken for granted, around him the people looked so poor dressed in their plain and drab browns and greens. He didn't want to look like a prince; he wanted people to look over his head, to ignore him, as he made his way ahead. Some of their attention as he went lingered on him, but they must have dismissed him as a young lord. He hoped this anyway.

It had been a long while since he had been in the streets in the city before his home. But he remembered these paths, as he had come to know them well. It felt strange to be here again, so nostalgic.

He knew where he was heading, and moved there quickly.

Cam came to the right place, using a stack of crates to quickly climb upon the rooftops. From here he ran the rest of the way, coming to the courtyard that was his destination.

He slowed when he reached the edge of the rooftop, leaning tentatively over the courtyard.

His heart stopped in his chest. He couldn't believe his luck.

She's here! He gasped, eyes wide as he gazed down at Lucy within the courtyard of her home. *She's actually here!*

He saw her clearer now, closer than when he saw her from the tower, almost able to reach out and touch her.

She was sitting upon a wooden bench beneath him, stitching and humming to herself as she did so.

Cam very carefully and very slowly climbed upon the tree that overlooked the courtyard, hanging onto the branches tightly, ignoring the old pains in his body as he moved awkwardly forward. He stepped off the roof, holding tightly onto the thin branches of the tree that sprouted in the courtyard.

He hung over her now, watching as Lucy stitched. She was so beautiful.

It had been several years since he had seen her last. He had thought that he would never see her again.

She was mature now, having grown into a woman's body. Her skin was perfect, her hair orange like the setting sun shone brightly below him. Her body was slender and curved. Cam tilted his head as he watched her. Her shoulders were bare, as were her arms. The dress she wore was plain, but looked good on her.

Cam's heart skipped in his chest as he watched her.

She was beautiful, oh so beautiful.

Cam's eyes grew gentle then as he watched her, and for a moment he felt happiness stir within him.

Interlude start

The masked figure laughed loudly to himself, staring at the monitor as he leant forward upon the controls.

‘Oh Cam’ he said, wiping his eyes. ‘Well...’ he sighed, typing furiously on the keyboard before him. ‘You are becoming a man after all. It’s not wrong to have these thoughts...I can see where you’re really looking.’

The masked figure looked up at the monitor again. He pressed the final key, doing so deliberately.

‘Snap!’ he said.

Interlude end

Cam heard a sudden creak. His heart stopped in his chest as he turned his head to look behind him.

Below him Lucy stopped what she was doing. She suddenly lifted her head.

The branch Cam stood on creaked for a second time.

‘Oh no....’

It snapped, and fell.

Lucy jumped to her feet in shock as Cam awkwardly picked himself up off the ground, trying to free himself from the leaves and branches around him.

At first she appeared scared, and rightly so. Before, she had been sitting quietly and seemingly alone in the small courtyard of her home. Now suddenly a stranger had fallen from the sky.

She glanced fearfully towards the door of her home, before looking back at him. She furrowed her brow then as Cam struggled to free himself from the branches that tore at his clothes.

She stepped closer, staring at him intently, and she saw that it wasn’t a stranger after all.

‘I know you’ she spoke slowly, staring at him hard, analyzing him. ‘I’ve met you before. I’m sure of it.’

Cam straightened, gazing about him nervously, feeling suddenly so exposed, so naked, so out in the open.

‘...I shouldn’t be here.’ He looked back at Lucy then, palms beginning to sweat. ‘I’m sorry’ he said timidly, ‘...I’m sorry I...didn’t want to scare you...I’m sorry.’

‘I know you’ Lucy told him again, stepping forwards. ‘How do I know you?’

He met her gaze reluctantly, seeing as Lucy frowned furiously at him as she thought.

‘How do I know you...?’

‘I....’ Cam mumbled. ‘I....’ he clenched his jaw, forcing the next words out of his mouth before he could hesitate. ‘My name is...’

He trailed off.

‘I do know you’ she spoke slowly. ‘You’re...that boy....living in the guild of thieves.’

His throat grew tighter as he watched her, waiting for her reaction.

Please don’t judge me he thought. Please remember...

And then she suddenly smiled.

‘Cam?’ she stepped closer again.

His eyes grew wide.

‘Oh gods’ she smiled, hands going to her mouth. ‘Is that really you? How you’ve grown!’ She moved towards him then, suddenly embracing him tightly. Cam flinched as she did so, grimacing in pain.

Lucy stepped back then, looking alarmed. ‘I’m sorry’ she said. ‘Did I hurt you?’

‘No...’ Cam said averting his eyes. ‘I just...the fall...’

‘I can’t believe it’s you! What are you doing here? I thought the thieves guild left.’

‘I’m not....’ Cam began.

‘Oh’ Lucy said then. ‘I remember now. You never really belonged there did you? You’re the prince...soon to be king....’ She gasped then, as if suddenly seeing him properly for the first time. ‘...You’re the prince...soon to be king....’ She half-turned away, hand going to her head. ‘A king...a king in my courtyard....right before me...’

She looked back at him.

Cam glanced towards her tentatively. He grimaced, holding himself as something pained him in his side.

‘Something’s wrong’ Lucy suddenly realised, noticing the way he held himself. ‘May I?’ she asked, taking a step forwards.

‘N-no’ Cam said waving his hands at her. ‘It’s fine. I’m fine really.’

‘Now don’t be like that’ Lucy scolded, frowning at him as she moved closer still, so close Cam could feel the heat from her body. ‘You must have hurt yourself. Let me have a look.’

‘I’m fine. Really’ Cam hastened, but she wouldn’t have it.

She grabbed his shirt.

Cam watched her tentatively as she lifted it.

‘Oh gods...’ she breathed.

She saw the bruises there; the wounds over his body.

‘Who did this to you?’

Cam stifled a sob then, biting his fist and turning away.

A short time later, Cam sat with Lucy on the bench. She had gone back into her home to get a wet rag, and washed him now, wiping the blood away from the injuries he had suffered from his fall and seeing clearer his older wounds.

‘You’re a prince’ Lucy told him meekly. ‘Aren’t you?’

Cam kept his head turned away from her, glaring sulkily at the floor. ‘Yeah’ he answered resentfully. ‘I am.’

She leant back from him then, holding the rag in her hand. She looked as if she wanted to say something, to say many things, but didn’t know where to begin. And so she said nothing.

Cam flinched as he felt the rag touch his cheek, as Lucy gently washed away the flecks of blood from the scratches that were there.

‘Does it hurt?’ she asked him tentatively.

‘Yeah’ he said, ‘a little.’

She continued to wash the blood from him.

‘There’ she said when she had finished. ‘That’s as good as I can do.’

‘You are kind’ Cam said glancing towards her again. ‘Thank you.’

‘What happened to you?’

Cam looked away again.

‘I don’t mean to pry’ Lucy went on, ‘but the injuries are quite severe. You must be in a lot of pain.’

‘I’ll be fine’ Cam grumbled.

‘Who did this to you?’

‘I...’ Cam said to the floor.

‘Look at me’ Lucy told him.

Cam raised his head, meeting her gaze at last.

‘Is there someone who is hurting you?’ she asked him.

‘Yeah’ Cam said, unable to stop himself. ‘But...there is nothing I can do...he is.....is....’ he balled his fists as his throat felt tight. ‘I can’t protect myself.’

‘You are a prince’ Lucy told him. ‘Is there *nothing* you can do?’

‘No’ Cam told her quietly. ‘I am alone.’

Lucy watched him sadly and in silence.

‘Why did you come here?’ she spoke at last.

‘I wanted to see you’ Cam replied, speaking more confidently now. ‘I...I recognised you when you came into the palace gardens. I...I couldn’t believe my eyes....after so many years...but I still knew who you were....even though you had changed.’ He smiled weakly, his eyes growing warmer. ‘There are so few people after all who have hair like yours.’

‘You like it?’ she asked, touching the ends of her orange hair and twirling it between her fingers. ‘The other children used to tease me for it...they still do...even though they’re all grown up now.’

‘I *do* like it’ Cam said, feeling a little more relaxed. ‘I think...it looks good...’

‘I’m glad’ Lucy said to him. ‘Most people just think it looks strange.’

‘Well they’re wrong’ Cam said defiantly.

Lucy smiled even wider now. ‘That’s very kind of you.’ She faced ahead again, patting her dress flat to get rid of the creases. ‘So’ she said to him, ‘why did you come here?’

‘To see you.’

‘I know. You said that...’ Lucy answered, ‘but why?’

‘I.....I...’ Cam bit his lip in thought. ‘I had to get away from the palace. My brother and I aren’t allowed to leave anymore. We’re trapped there.’

‘That’s why you want to get away?’

‘Since...’ Cam began, ‘since that incident...several years ago when my brother and I were living in the guild, we have not been allowed to leave. Our mother was furious. Both Luke and I put our lives in danger...we could have been killed when....’ he gritted his teeth. ‘I can’t even remember clearly what happened. I remember a prison, trying to free another member of our guild who was captured. A young girl. But she died, and her mother who tried to save her...I got away...I remember the guards shooting at me with crossbows...and....’ He shook his head. ‘I can’t remember anything else...it’s all lost to me.’

‘That sounds very dangerous.’

‘Yes’ Cam nodded slowly. ‘But it was worth it, just to get away from the palace. My brother and I hate it there.’

‘Why?’

‘The wounds on my body should say enough’ he told her.

'I see.' She turned away.

A moments silence passed between them.

'Why did you come to the gardens?' Cam asked her. 'And how did you get in?'

'One of the gates at the back was rotten' Lucy explained. 'It's only a very narrow door hidden by ivy. It's difficult to spot, almost impossible from the inside of the garden if you didn't know it was already there. But from the outside....' She trailed off. 'The garden has the most wonderful fruits, apples and pears and plums...'

'That's why you came to the garden?' Cam asked her. 'Isn't it dangerous? I don't know what the guards would do if they caught you.'

'That's what makes it more interesting' Lucy winked.

'I want you to promise me' Cam spoke harshly, 'promise me you'll never come to the palace again!'

'What?'

'Promise me' Cam snapped at her.

She stared back at him in shock, unable to speak at first, and then...

'Alright' she replied quietly. 'If that's...what you really want...'

'I do. I mean...' Cam blushed slightly. 'I just...care...about you....' He looked away hastily.

The door to the home opened suddenly, and a male figure appeared.

'Lucy, dinner's....' he broke off suddenly, seeing Cam sitting there. His expression changed instantly to that of suspicion. 'Who's this?' he asked Lucy shortly.

'Roland' Lucy said rising to her feet. 'This is Cam.'

'I don't know a Cam' Roland answered. 'How did he get here? He didn't come through the house.'

'He climbed along the roof' Lucy answered sweetly.

Cam watched Roland nervously, seeing clear in his expression that he was becoming angry.

'You know him' Lucy added noticing this too. 'You caught him trying to steal from you.'

Roland's expression darkened further, and Cam grew evermore nervous and uncertain.

'I...don't think you should be telling him that' he said to Lucy anxiously.

'I'm just reminding him' Lucy told Cam. 'Roland' she said back to him. 'This is Cam, you know, the boy who lived in the thieves guild, he stayed with us for a short time...he came to our house late at night being chased by guards...you pretended he was family to save him....'

'Cam?' Roland said, expression changing instantly as it all came flooding back to him. 'Is that really you?'

'I....well...yes...' Cam said uncertainly.

'Gods it's been forever' Roland said striding up to him and grasping his forearm in a tight hold. 'It's so good to see you!'

'Oh' Cam sighed in relief, smiling back at him. 'Thanks...it's good to see you too.'

'What happened to your face?'

'Oh, I just...fell from the tree' Cam answered awkwardly.

Roland found this amusing.

'Were you spying on my sister?' he asked.

'What?!' Cam panicked. 'No! I-I didn't...I mean...'

'Relax' Roland laughed at him, slapping him hard on the shoulder affectionately as Cam tried hard not to flinch. 'I'm just teasing you.'

Beside them Lucy stifled a giggle behind her hands.

‘Alright’ Roland smiled nodding to himself. ‘Would you like to join us for dinner?’

‘Um...yes....please’ Cam said, ‘if I’m not being a bother.’

‘Of course you aren’t’ Roland beamed moving away again. ‘Come on. It’s all ready. You are welcome in our home....anytime...’

Miranda went to the home of Incognito, to find that he was not there.

She searched for him for many hours, finding him at last.

He was tied to a stake, dead, his body nothing but a charred crisp.

He had been sentenced to death by order of the council, sentenced to death, for being a heathen.

They had found him at last. Miranda was only able to recognise him because of the jewellery he wore. His thick silver bands around his wrists and the silver chain and pendant still hung from around his neck.

Miranda watched as his body smoked, her face hidden by the low hood she wore.

Miranda turned on her heel and marched away, moving swiftly and silently through the crowd.

She returned to the palace, and found Luke.

She could see by his expression that he was surprised to see her.

‘Luke’ she spoke calmly. ‘How have you been.....where is your brother?’

‘Cam!’ Dee cried when it had been explained to her who he was. ‘How wonderful to see you!’

Lucy’s mother rushed up to him, hugging him tightly as if she had known him all his life. As if he had never left.

‘Thanks’ Cam laughed awkwardly as he held him, trying to ignore the pains in his body.

‘Thank you.’

‘Come’ Dee ushered him. ‘Come sit. Come on.’

Another chair was pulled up for him and Cam sat at the table.

He looked at the other figures who sat there now.

Bill, Lucy’s father sat at the head of the table. Either side of him where Lucy’s brothers, Daniel, Vincent and Roland. And beside Cam, Lucy sat.

He glanced nervously at her, feeling a skip in his heart as she smiled at him.

He turned sharply away, scratching his itching palms.

‘There’ Dee said happily, putting the last dish upon the table. ‘I hope you’re hungry’ she said to Cam.

Cam looked at the table before him that was stacked with food, pork and roast potatoes and carrots and swede and peas and beans and broccoli and gravy.

‘It looks good’ Cam said quietly, feeling a sudden pang of hunger.

‘Here’ Dee smiled kindly at him, rising again. ‘Let me serve you.’

A moment later she put his plate back in front of him, and Cam stared wide eyed at the small mountain before him as the others began to serve themselves.

‘Eat what you can’ Dee beamed happily at him. ‘Leave anything you don’t want. The dog will eat it later.’

Cam glanced around him, suddenly noticing a little terrier staring up at him with hungry eyes and licking its lips.

He turned back to his plate again.

‘Thank you’ Cam said, blinking back the tears in his eyes. ‘Thank you...’

‘Will you be coming back?’ Lucy asked him when the meal was over and Cam said that he had to leave.

‘I don’t know’ Cam mumbled in reply. ‘I’ll try’ he told her. ‘I promise.’

‘Ok’ Lucy nodded.

They stood on the doorstep of the home. Cam had already said his farewells to the rest of the family. They had gone to attend to their own business now, leaving Cam and Lucy together.

‘I hope do you come back’ Lucy beamed at him. ‘It was nice to see you again.’

‘It was?’ Cam held his hands tightly before him to stop them from shaking. ‘Th-thank you...I mean.....it was nice to see you too, to see all of you.’

His heart skipped suddenly as Lucy leant closer to him.

She kissed him on the cheek, smiling at him as she straightened again.

Cam hunched his shoulders, blushing furiously.

‘I...I mean....’

‘You should go now’ Lucy smiled in amusement. ‘Visit us again soon.’

‘Ok’ he said to the floor. ‘I’ll try.’ He paused then. ‘Well...see you later...and thanks...’

He turned and ran away.

Cam rounded the corner, leaning back against the wall and pressing his hands against his racing heart.

He took several slow and steady breaths, before straightening again, and heading back to the palace, walking at a quickened pace.

Cam returned to the garden, clambering awkwardly through the hole and running to the base of the tower where he had left the rope.

Horror struck his heart, when he saw that it was gone.

Oh gods no!

He searched desperately for it about the bushes in case it had fallen, but could not find it.

That could only mean one thing.

Someone else had found it.

Cam’s chest rose and fell sharply as he realised this.

There was no way to get into the palace now, save for the front entrance, which was guarded.

Cam drew a slow and steady breath, bracing himself.

He turned and slowly walked away, heading to the front entrance of the palace to face the inevitable.

He found a guard, and spoke to him.

‘I will teach you the price of disobedience’ Brioke spat, grasping him by the hair and slamming his head back against the wall.

He beat and kicked Cam again, worsening the pain and injuries he already suffered.

This continued for several minutes, before Brioke dragged him into an empty room, rounding on him again.

He dragged Cam towards a table, shoving him forwards so that Cam leant over it.

Cam stifled a sob as Brioke began to unbuckle his belt, pressing a hand forcefully upon his back so he could not push himself up.

Cam gritted his teeth as Brioke thrust into him again and again, balling his fists and squeezing his eyes tight shut as tears began to seep from his closed eyes.

Brioke was rough, violent, as he always had been.

Cam could do nothing but wait until it was all over. That was all he ever could do, always so weak, so helpless. What was the good in being the prince if he was always so powerless?

The pain was tearing at him from inside, but like the so many times before, he could do nothing to stop it, nothing but wait, until it would end.

End Cam thought as Brioke had his way with him. *Nothingness. Would that be so bad?*

Brioke’s movement began to quicken as he reached his climax, and as Cam leant forwards on the table, with dead eyes out of focus, a single thought came to him.

Lucy.

She was the single reason now he had not already taken his own life.

Brioke thrust in hard one last time, throwing his head back and groaning in pleasure.

He stayed where he was for a moment, Cam blinked several times as he stared at the wood of the table before his eyes, waiting for Brioke to pull out.

He did so, and Cam slowly straightened up, pushing himself gingerly off the table.

Cam didn’t turn, but waited for what Brioke would do next.

He left.

When Brioke was gone Cam fell to his knees, crying openly now as he curled up into a ball, hugging himself.

He stayed in the room alone for the longest time.

Two years later Twins aged nineteen

It was the day before the coronation, the day before Cam was to become the king.

The big event was just hours away.

He was being prepared now. Standing on a low stool as tailors tended to his clothes, what he would wear on the day.

When they were finished with him, Cam dismissed them, wanting only to be alone.

They had bowed to him, and left swiftly on his command.

The room was silent once more.

Cam stepped off the low stool, moving across the room and approaching the mirror on the other side, seeing himself in the reflection. He was dressed in dark turquoise with black and gold edges, with a long deep purple trail that ran from his shoulders. Within the material he wore were dyed in darker shades, depictions of birds flying free amongst little patterns that looked like raindrops. His black hair was swept back so that his face could be seen clearer. He didn't normally like it this way. But...

He smiled to himself, thinking a thought he had not thought before as he suddenly realised something for the first time in his life.

'Handsome' he said turning his head from one side to the other, taking in every feature.

He began to feel good about himself then as he stood before the full-length mirror that had been propped up against the dresser. Either side of the mirror on tall candle-holders burned little flames. It was dark in the room, and he was alone. Or so he thought.

'Don't you look fine.'

Cam's heart felt as if it had been plunged into icy water, and all his confidence and good feeling were suddenly blown away like leaves in the wind.

Cam slowly turned towards Brioke who stood behind him, watching him with admiration and smiling his predatory smile.

'You look beautiful' Brioke told him as he stepped closer.

Cam said nothing, but continued to watch him closely, never taking his eyes off him.

'You'll be king soon' Brioke went on, stopping before him. 'Isn't that an exciting thought?'

He glanced to Cam's reflection, then looked back at Cam.

'You remember our agreement....don't you?'

'Agreement?'

'You're mine' Brioke said. 'You belong to me. You'll do anything I tell you to. You remember that don't you?'

Cam didn't answer, only stared back. Brioke reached forwards, running his fingers through Cam's hair. Cam for a moment thought Brioke was going to kiss him, but instead his grip suddenly tightened, and he slammed Cam's head into the mirror.

Cam stumbled back, crying out in pain as the glass cut his eyes. But he was allowed little reprieve as Brioke grabbed him again, shoving him back towards the stairs nearby.

Cam lost his footing, and fell, hitting his head on the way down.

When he came too, he found himself at the bottom of the stairs.

Cam picked himself up slowly, he could feel by the warm dampness against his skin that he was bleeding where the glass had cut his eyes and face, and there were aches all over his body where he fallen.

He sat up gingerly, groaning in agony.

Cam lifted his head back up towards the top of the stairs where stood Brioke. Cam's heart jolted when he saw Brioke was holding a loaded crossbow, and was pointing right at him.

'Stay right where you are' Brioke said firmly down at him. 'Or I'll kill you.'

Cam froze in terror, staring up at him with wide-eyes.

Brioke descended the stairs, moving closer towards Cam, all the while holding the crossbow high. Cam's heartbeat slowed as Brioke approached, their eye locked onto one another.

When Brioke reached the bottom of the stairs he stood over him, the bolt hovering over Cam's head and body.

'You are to be king soon' Brioke repeated. 'You will have power, you can pass laws...' his head tilted as he considered, 'don't forget about me' he finished. 'You won't forget about me.....will you?'

Cam began to tremble.

'Speak' Brioke commanded.

'N-n-no' Cam voiced. 'I w-w-would never....'

Brioke furrowed his brow.

'Would never...?'

'N-n-n-n...'

'Will you trust and accept my guidance when you become king?'

'I t-t-t-t-trust and accept....' Cam struggled to finish.

Brioke lowered his weapon, placing it on the side.

'Come here' Brioke said.

Cam moved to stand; then fell again, his leg seizing up.

'I said stand!'

'I c-c-c-c-can't' Cam said beginning to panic. 'My leg....its....its....its....'

Cam flinched suddenly, expecting Brioke to react. But he simply walked away.

Cam stayed where he was for the longest time, until he was by chance found by his brother, who began to panic at the sight of him, immediately running to get a healer.

'I told you' Cam glowered angrily back, 'I'm f-f-f-f-fine.'

'Cam?' Luke said seriously. 'Did you really *accidentally* fall down the stairs on your own?'

'Yes.'

'Then how did you get glass in your eyes?'

'Its n-n-n-n-nothing' Cam shot angrily back.

Luke grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him as he spoke.

'Since when did you have a stutter?'

The next day, was the coronation.

Cam stood before the double doors. The guards either side of the doors reached forwards, and opened them simultaneously, allowing Cam to step forward.

Cam marched slowly ahead along the red carpet, dressed now in the dark turquoise and black he had worn the day before, the deep purple cloak trailing after him as he went. He looked magnificent, his clothes finely cut to fit his lean figure, with jewels woven into the fabric and glistening in the light that shone through the stained glass windows.

Either side of him the benches were full of people, all their eyes fixed on him. The colossal hall was packed now, guards stood tall in their shining gold armour, weapons at their side.

They were positioned all around the hall, several by the door, and several at the head of the hall, where Cam was to stand.

He swallowed the lump in his throat, trying not to meet anyone's gaze, and staring only forwards. His black hair was swept back, allowing his face to be seen clearer.

The wounds he had suffered the day before stood out clearly now, as plain as day. The whites of his eyes were dotted with little red cuts where the mirror had cut him. His face was cut too. Cam grimaced as he walked, feeling very aware of the people either side muttering as they watched him pass by, no doubt talking about his injuries.

What happened to his face?

How did he get those marks?

Cam could hear them as they spoke. He tried his best to ignore them, but their words, though whispered, cut into him like knives, and he fought back his tears, willing himself to be strong. Either side of him in the stained glass windows, the depiction of the seven gods that it was believed created their world, looked over him now. Cam felt their eyes following him also.

He walked beneath the trumpets that sounded, heralding his arrival.

He ascended the steps, doing so slowly, feeling the pains in his body. He stopped before the stained glass window before him and turned around, facing the hundreds of people. The most important people in the kingdom were here, all the lords and political figures and some figures from foreign lands. On his left side, standing at the front of the hall, stood Heremon, Rhona, Agnus, Denzil and Desmond. On his right side, stood, Storin, Tarrant, Lamont, Valeri, Castello, Eden, and standing before all of them, was Brioke.

Cam avoided his gaze, as the holy man beside him, stepped forward and began to speak, his loud voice echoing throughout the vast and mighty hall.

Cam barely heard him as he ranted on. His attention drifted to the faces at the front of the hall. Two figures sitting on the benches at the front watched him closely, seeing the wounds on his face, and both looking worried. Luke and Miranda, Luke especially seemed tenser and a little nervous.

Cam looked away, staring at the ground.

The holy man finished speaking. Another figure approached, carrying the king's crown upon a velvet cushion. The holy man took the crown, turning to Cam. Cam bowed as he had been taught to do, allowing the holy man to place the crown upon his head.

He straightened then, turning to face the people before him once more.

'I am Cameron, now your king, and I swear under the seven gods above, to be a just and honest king, loyal to his people, and always kind.'

Chapter Twelve

Missy stumbled through the door, screaming for her father, only to find him already dead, cut down and still bleeding, his blood soaking into the lime green carpet of his study.

Missy fell to her knees in horror, clawing at her face in terror and shock as the soldiers in the room turned to her, one of them holding a bloodied sword which dripped at the end.

Behind her the soldiers that had been chasing her caught up, grabbing her around the waist and haling her up.

She let out a cry of despair as the soldier carried her over to the table, throwing her across it and pushing down on her.

The soldier with the bloodied sword wiped his blade clean and sheathed it as the other soldiers in the room turned their attention onto the young woman, as she continued to scream. Downstairs, the slaughter continued. The mother of the household lay dead on the steps, from her chest blossomed lush red. The servants had almost all been killed too, but in a small cupboard in the kitchen downstairs, one of the servants hid, hugging the two young children to her.

She dared to believe that for the briefest moment, they may get out alive.

But they had been found.

The door to the cupboard was suddenly thrown open, and the servant and children stared up at the soldier in wide eyed terror, knowing it was the end for them.

The dog that had been hiding behind them in silence lunged forwards then, attacking the man's arm as he moved to shield his face from the bite.

The soldier threw the dog down, impaling it with his sword and killing it in one swift blow, before turning back to the frightened figures.

The servant screamed as the children were pulled from her grasp, one after the other they were killed without thought or pause and thrown aside, before the soldier rounded on the servant. Grabbing her by the throat he lifted her small frame in one hand, stabbing her through the stomach, jerking the blade back and dropping her. She crumpled to the floor.

The soldier marched from the room.

Beneath the low table hid another servant, hands clapped tightly over his mouth as he tried not to whimper, cheeks streaked with tears and whole body trembling. He leant down, daring to look out, and seeing a short distance away, another servant, and older lady, hiding beneath another low table as he was doing.

The boy closed his eyes as more tears rolled down his cheeks, suffering the worst kind of fear imaginable. The kind of fear only experience by someone who stood right before their own demise, so close, you could reach out and touch it.

The slaughter continued. The boy and the older lady heard the sound of more frightened servants being found and killed, the screams, the songs of the blades.

Many would die, but by nightfall, the boy and the older lady would make it.

He would help her out from under the table, taking both her hands in his, and fleeing their master's house together, never looking back.

The rumours would spread then, of how their master, a political rival to many, was murdered in cold blood by his opposition.

‘Cam!’ Luke called, banging on his bedroom door. ‘Open up! I know you're in there!’

When there was no answer, he banged again, calling louder.

‘Have you heard what's happened? How could you allow this?! We have to talk. Please! People are dying!’

From inside the bedroom, Cam ran to face the door, glaring at it.

‘Go away!’ he called back. ‘I don’t want to speak to you!’

‘Listen’ Luke’s muffled voice came from through the door. ‘I don’t know what your feelings are towards me. I don’t even know whether or not you hate me...but....’ he broke off momentarily. ‘We have to talk about this. This is bigger than either of us. People’s lives are at stake.’

Cam’s heart clenched in his chest, and he gritted his teeth as he felt arms wrap around him from behind.

‘Go away!’ Cam shouted again as Brioke caressed him and kissed his neck. ‘I don’t care about you.’

Cam heard silence, and then the sound of footsteps retreating. The footfalls were heavy and the pace was quick. Luke was furious.

When Cam was sure Luke had gone, he turned to Brioke, kissing him back, and squeezing his eyes tight in disgust as he did.

Brioke dragged him across the room, pushing him forwards onto the bed.

Cam did not resist. He waited submissively, resting on his hands and knees as Brioke had his way.

Later that night, when it was dark and Cam was alone, he lay on his bed crying.

Curled up he hugged his pillow to him, sobbing into it. He cried for hours, until he had no more tears left in him to shed.

‘I wish I was dead’ he whispered to himself over and over again. ‘I wish I was dead...’

A few weeks later, and the council called for a meeting.

Cam sat at the head of the table. On his left side, sat five people, on his right were seven, the left and the right hands of the king, whose purpose was to help guide the king in his rule. Together these twelve members made up the council.

Nearest Cam, sitting on his right side, was Brioke.

‘We have summoned you here today’ Eden began, ‘to talk about finding you a wife.’

‘A wife?’ Cam began nervously.

‘Yes. It is expected for the king to have a queen, and of course in time, children.’

Children?

‘It is expected’ Eden went on. ‘Your father married your mother when he was your age, and although it took him a while to father children, it happened. Without children, you have no line, no one to inherit your crown when you die.’

‘Isn’t...’ Cam began hesitantly, ‘isn’t it a bit too early?’

‘If you were to die without having children, it would throw the kingdom into chaos.’

Like when father died Cam thought, *except it would be far worse, because Luke and I were still around.* He swallowed a lump in his throat then, feeling sick to his stomach. *I have acted so recklessly in the past he realised. How many times was my life in danger, and I didn’t even realise it? And Luke? We could both have been killed when we were still children, then the*

council would be in charge. One of them would have become steward. He thought, lifting his head. *What saved us?*

His attention flickered very briefly towards Brioke who sat close to him.

Are things really that different than they would be if I were not here? The council are still in control of me...I know...

‘We must find you a wife as soon as possible’ Eden hastened. ‘Once you have children...sons...it will strengthen your position. Your father was lucky to have two sons, you will have more.’

The council waited.

‘What do you say?’ Eden prompted.

‘To what?’ Cam asked, his voice a little shaky.

Several member of the council around him sighed, rolling their eyes to the ceiling as their attention beginning to drift.

‘To having a wife’ Eden sighed patiently. ‘Do you agree to this?’

Cam glanced about him nervously, feeling his heart skip many beats inside his chest and his itching palms sweating, realising he was the centre of attention, as the others waited for his response.

‘Do you agree?’ Eden said again, ‘to marriage?’

‘Yes’ Cam spoke quietly. ‘I agree.’

Beside him, Brioke tightened his jaw, clenching his fist, but he said nothing.

‘It will be arranged then’ Eden said. ‘Messengers will be sent out, in search of a princess for you to marry.’

It was that very same day that twelve messengers were gathered at the gates before the palace. Each mounted on beautiful pure white horses; the messengers were dressed in bright and fabulous colours of light purple and lush blue all lined in gold. They were easy to distinguish, and could be seen and clearly recognised from far away.

Cam watched from the top of the tower, the one place from this prison where he could still see the rest of the world, feel the wind, the warmth of the sun on his skin, and the icy chill of the nights. Leaning forwards against the balcony wall, he saw the twelve messengers ride out of the palace gates and through the streets and away, slipping out of view.

‘A wife?’ Cam mumbled to himself. ‘I am to be given a wife?’

Cam let out a sigh, shoulders slumped. He hung his head, stepping back and straightening.

‘This could be a good thing for you’ his mother said from behind him. ‘Whoever they find, you may come to love her one day.’

Cam turned to face his mother, beside her, Luke leant back against the wall behind him, arms folded and silent.

‘I’m sure she will make you a wonderful wife’ Miranda continued, ‘whoever she is. And even if you don’t come to love her, you will love your children.’

‘I have no interest in such things’ Cam looked away, and back to the city below them.

‘You don’t want children?’ Luke spoke up.

‘It’s not that’ Cam mumbled. ‘But...’

‘Then what?’ Luke prompted.

‘How can I be happy with the idea of bringing a princess into this poisonous environment?’ Cam asked them. ‘And children? How can I raise children in such corruption?’

‘I came here’ Miranda said to him.

‘And how happy have you been?’ Cam asked her. ‘How happy have Luke and I been?’

‘Point taken’ Miranda said flatly, turning her head away.

For a moment Cam had thought that she would try to console him. He guessed he should have known better.

‘And anyway’ Cam mumbled, leaning forwards on the balcony wall again. ‘I know what you do to yourself, and I know what has been done to you.’

Miranda’s hand went to her arm then. Beneath her elbow-length gloves, were lines of scars. She had done this to herself. And the thing that had been done to her years ago, was the attempt on her life by poison, from which she had never fully recovered.

‘We are all lucky to be alive’ Cam finished. ‘All of us, if you can call this living. How can I be happy with bringing another one here into this torment?’

‘Perhaps it will make you stronger?’ Miranda suggested. ‘Perhaps.’

She moved away silently, gliding like a ghost, through the door and treading carefully down the spiral staircase of the tower. Behind her, Luke followed, keeping a close eye on her, ready to catch her if she were to fall.’

Cam moved away from the balcony wall, sitting on the floor with his legs cross.

He lifted the book which lay on the floor beside him, placing it on his lap and flicking through the pages until he came to the correct one.

He ran his hand across the page, lifting the book, he began to read.

Interlude start

The masked figure stumbled as a colossal piece of building crashed into the ground behind her, thrown from a catapult from the city she marched towards now.

The masked figure rose again, dusting herself off and brushing the earth from the knees of her black cloak.

She straightened, tilting her head back to the sky, gazing through the round windows in her mask as a great disc flew by, glowing green and spinning fast before it crashed into the ground.

Isami pulled the crows mask suddenly from her face, drawing a deep gasp as she did so, and breathing the free air.

She sighed then, blinking slowly and waving the soot from her eyes as it rained down from the clouds upon her. She started forwards again, striding towards the hollering, the mass of dark figures before her, all clad in heavy and exaggerated armour, slipping the plague mask beneath her cloak as she went, hiding it away.

The crowd parted as she pushed her way forwards, giving her a wide birth as she searched for *the one*.

‘Raksha!’ Isami called. ‘Raksha!’

The woman she sought, she found at the head of the army.

Raksha turned on hearing her name, watching Isami who drew closer. She narrowed her eyes. 'Again?' she hissed. 'I have given you my answer.'

Raksha was a beautiful woman in the prime of her life. Unlike the men around her that followed her command, men who were heavily armoured, she wore no armour whatsoever. She dressed to show her figure, and left little to the imagination. In one hand she held a mighty staff made of metal and designed with harsh and jagged edges, at its head was a depiction of a skull with horns, its eyes glowing green. In the other hand, she held no shield, in fact she carried nothing at all to use to defend herself with.

'I came to try to persuade you' Isami urged her, 'to change your mind before it's too late...before you cannot turn back.'

'I already told you' Raksha snapped. 'I do not want to join your organization.'

'Well' Isami mumbled, 'I'd hardly refer to ourselves as an organisation, we are not all that organised. But we are still looking for a replacement for Auntie. Even after all this time, we are still looking.'

'And you want me to replace her' Raksha answered flatly. 'I have told you that I am not interested. Why do you pester me like this?'

'Because you are the best' Isami replied.

'Well find someone else.'

'There is no one else.'

Raksha turned away. Around her, crawling in the dirt and in various degrees of decomposition, were bodies. Some were her own men, some not. Raksha was a necromancer, and these creatures, these abominations of god, were under her control. Some had been dead for mere minutes. Others were skeletons, with rotting flesh hanging from their bones.

The air reeked.

'Just one last thing' Isami added, as Raksha moved away. 'If you were to die, would you want to be brought back to life?'

Raksha glanced back, regarding Isami with a sceptical look, a sneer upon her lips.

'Yes' she said. 'I would, for I have work still left to do, and too much left unfinished.'

She faced ahead now. Casting her arm out, and commanding the dead men to march forwards.

They obeyed, though she spoke not a word.

Isami watched mutely as the rotting corpses and skeletal figures reached the base of the wall, the first defence of the white city before them. Its pure colour was already stained with corruption. Black streaks caused by unholy spells and red from the blood that was spilt; huge amounts of blood pooled the floors and were splashed against the white walls.

Raksha's eyes glowed green with power and her magic as the minions under her control created a ladder out of their own bodies to scale the wall, climbing over, and slaughtering all that hid within the city.

Isami stepped back, tilting her head.

'Until next time' she said to Raksha, though the necromancer did not hear her, 'until next time we meet...'

Interlude end

Many weeks passed, and rumours began to spread that the king was looking for a wife. People whispered amongst themselves. Many were excited. Many hoped a new queen would change their lives, perhaps for the better. And of course children would strengthen the royal family, and in turn, bring stability to the kingdom.

Miranda sat at the bar in the dingy building, drinking heavily as she listened to these whispers behind her, surrounded by burly men.

‘I heard she’s a rare beauty’ one man said nearby, ‘a real treasure, like the kind rarely seen.’ Miranda scowled as she heard this, clenching her jaw and cracking her knuckles in the most unlady-like way. *Stupid fools* she thought. *How could you know that? She’s not even been found yet?*

‘Miranda?’

The queen relaxed slightly, lifting her head to one of the men that had spoken, one of the many that sat beside her at the bar.

‘Yes Brad’ she sighed. ‘I know.’

The other men watched her, waiting, expectant. These were her men, loyal to her, and loyal to her late husband Carl, the dead king. These men saw the corruption that was happening in the kingdom around them. They wished to stop it, and change things back to the way they were, before the king had died, and the council had taken control.

Miranda was not the only one to see the truth, there were a few others who saw it too, and saw Cam for what he really was.

A shadow king.

They knew he was weak, but Cam was still his father’s son, and those that were truly loyal to the crown, would support him, no matter what.

Blood was blood.

Miranda merely sighed wearily, bowing her head and closing her eyes.

She felt so very very tired.

Hundreds of miles away, in a palace garden, a girl sat.

She was a pretty little thing, sixteen years old. She was dressed in a beautiful flowing white garment that was covered in jewels and little decorative chains. Her light brown hair was tied neatly back.

The princess raised her head to the golden clouds above her, tears streaming down her cheeks, as she absorbed everything that was around her, for this was the last time she would see her home.

‘I am to be sold’ she whispered, though nobody heard her.

She was alone in the garden, the large open garden that overlooked the city below them. She had been alone for most of her life; no one spent much time with her. Save for her brother, Jadon.

He found her. The princess didn't know what caused her to look around; it was almost as if she sensed him standing there. But when she looked up, she saw him, standing below the flowery archway watching her.

She stared at him. He looked sad.

Jadon opened his arms, and the princess rose from the bench, running towards him and into his embrace.

'Valery' the prince whispered to her. 'Don't be sad.'

Jadon was so much taller than her, and she only came up to his chest as she held him. He was older than she was, and wiser. The prince Jadon was twenty five. Valery had in the past other brothers and another sister. But her other brothers had gone away, and her other sister had gone away too. Valery remembered the last day she saw her sister, her sister had been sad, as she was now.

'Jadon' Valery sobbed. 'I don't want to go.'

Jadon didn't answer. Valery felt him bow his head, holding her tighter.

'I'm sorry' he said.

'Please don't say that!' she hollered, letting go of him and stepping back. 'Everyone is treating me different now. I feel like I am dying!'

Valery wanted her brother to say something, so desperately wanted him to comfort her, to tell her that everything was going to be alright.

But he simply stared at her mournfully, as if he felt dead inside.

A short while later Valery was brought before her parents.

'Stay safe' her mother said embracing her. 'Be happy. We will never forget you.'

The queen, her mother, seemed to love her very much, but for reasons Valery did not understand, could not see her very often.

Valery wanted to argue, to make them change their minds. But she knew nothing could be done. This was not in her mother's power, and her father, would not allow such protests from her. She did not feel for him as she did for her mother and brother, and she knew that he felt the same.

Her father had never seen her as a daughter.

He stood there now, watching her with scrutiny.

'Here' her mother said, handing Valery a small doll.

It was a thing she had made herself to give to her daughter when she was very young. Her father had disapproved, saying a queen should not be doing such trivial things. He had taken it away from Valery, and looked as if he wanted to do so now.

'Please' Valery begged him before he could speak. 'Please let me keep it. Please.'

The king frowned furiously down at her, pursing his lips with his hands upon his waist. He huffed irritably, at last relenting. He waved his hand at her dismissively, and Valery sighed, hugging the doll to her chest.

It was hers.

Her parents stood before the steps of the palace, the palace that was now no longer her home. They watched as she climbed into the carriage that waited at the foot of the steps before the palace, her luggage, all her clothes and most valuable possessions, were carried in after her by two servants.

Valery leant back in the seat within the carriage, watching her parents as they stood side by side.

Her mother's eyes were red, and she clutched a handkerchief in her hand. Beside her, her father looked bored.

The carriage rocked as Jadon entered, sitting opposite her.

The door of the carriage was slammed shut from the outside, and the servants backed away, heads bowed.

The coach driver snapped the reins, and the carriage jolted into motion. Valery fought back tears, watching her parents, her attention fixed on both of them.

She knew this was the last time she would ever see them again, and Jadon, who was only accompanying her until they reached the ship that would take her away from this land.

Cam was on his knees now, head bowed and hands together, praying before the statue of Kachi. A depiction of the goddess of the sea, where it was believed all life began. Her head was thrown back and her arms extended, she was enveloped by two great eels which curled around her scaly tail. This room was one of many dotted throughout the palace, little sanctuaries, hidden in quiet corners here and there. Cam found comfort in these places, and peace. Not even Brioke came here to look for him. Not yet anyway. Since he had become king, Cam spent less and less time with the books he loved so much, and more and more time here at the shrines.

He spoke to the gods often now, and would pray, asking for, begging for favours, begging for things to change.

'Please let me go outside' he spoke quietly to the goddess before him. 'Please. I have not left these walls for far too long. Please, let me see the outside world again, to be free as I was when I was a child. I want to be far away from here....I want to leave this place...and never come back.'

Day after day he prayed for the same thing, hoping that one day perhaps his prayers would be noticed by the gods, and perhaps even answered. The gods were busy, and many people prayed to them. He had to pray often to stand out from the others.

Cam raised his head, drawing his hands apart.

He rose to his feet, regarding the statue before him, staring at it intently.

I had hoped at least some things would have changed for the better once I became king he thought miserably. But they are just the same as before...if not worse.....

He turned from the shrine, and strode out of the room.

Outside the palace, all around the city were stationed lookouts. Single men, who appeared at a glance to be completely unremarkable, and anyone whose attention would linger on them, would swiftly move on to something else. There were sixteen of them, positioned in an unbroken circle all around the city, even to the north-west where there was the sea; they waited, posing here as lone fishermen in little rowboats. But all of their bows were strung and ready to fire, hidden from view beside their arrows. Here they waited for many days, even throughout the night, often changing shifts, but never leaving their posts abandoned.

On one day, one of the men who had been leaning against a tree outside the city, gazing up at the sky, saw at last what they had been waiting for. It was a messenger bird, a falcon, heading for the palace. The man rose swiftly to his feet, reaching for his bow and nocking his arrow, never taking his eyes off the bird.

He stood tall, drawing the string of the bow back.

He fired, and a moment later, the messenger bird fell from the sky.

The lookout concealed his bow again swiftly, before running as fast as he could to the spot where the bird had fallen.

He was just outside the city, beyond the walls and the streets, and so no one saw what he did. The man untied the little leather roll from the bird's leg, taking from within it the small piece of parchment and reading it quickly.

He was frozen as he read, then slipped the piece of parchment into a pocket, taking the dead falcon with him also and returning to the city.

The lookout, when he reached the building that could have been called their base, placed the dead bird upon the table. Before him, the queen looked up.

'I have a message' the lookout said handing it to her. 'Here.'

Miranda leant forward in her chair, taking the note from him and reading.

'They've found a princess' she said aloud. 'A young girl named Valery.'

Miranda rolled up the parchment again.

'My son is to be married soon. This princess is on her way.'

'We will make sure this note reaches the palace' another man said stepping forwards, taking the parchment from Miranda and tying it to the leg of the new falcon that rested on his arm.

'Don't worry' the man said to Miranda as he moved to the window. 'We will make sure she arrives at the palace safely.'

He opened the window, and the messenger bird took flight, heading to the palace where it had originally come from.

A short while later the falcon arrived at the palace as intended, and was found by one of the council members.

Brioke took the bird, unrolling the parchment and reading.

He scrunched the paper up then, gritting his teeth and breathing heavily.

He went to find Cam, but was unable. This palace was so vast, and there were many places to hide.

Cam however, was not within the palace, but sitting at the top of the tower, looking over at the world at his feet, the world he could not reach, as he thought about his future.

Hundreds of miles away, Valery sat opposite her brother in the carriage that took her further away from the home she had grown up in.

She clutched the doll to her chest, the gift given to her by her beloved mother. The last gift she will ever receive from her.

Her lip trembled, and she fought back the tears that threatened to fall.

'What's going to happen to me?'

Jadon who had been silent for the entire journey so far, raised his head.

‘I will never be able to leave my new home once I get there’ Valery went on. ‘What if...what if they are cruel?’

‘We take our chances’ Jadon replied simply.

‘Is that it?’

Valery stared at her brother.

‘They want you’ he said to her. ‘They have need of you. There is no reason for them to be cruel to you. Please don’t assume the worst, you’re thinking too much into it.’

Valery bowed her head again. ‘How can I not?’ she sighed. ‘There is so much that is expected of me now.’

Jadon rose from his seat, moving to sit beside her. He placed an arm around her shoulders.

‘I’m never going to forget about you’ he said to her. ‘Never.’

Valery could not hold back the tears now. The way her brother spoke, to her it seemed so final.

‘Please don’t be sad’ Jadon said to her, squeezing her shoulders. ‘I want to remember you as you always have been, the happy bubbly girl who always sees the good in everything. Where did that girl go?’

‘I’m sorry’ Valery whispered, raising her head and forcing a smile as a tear rolled down her cheek. ‘I am happy about this’ she told her brother. ‘I really am. I excited about meeting my new husband. I’m just really nervous. I want to be worthy of him.’

Jason smiled weakly down at her.

‘I’m sure he will love you the moment he lays eyes on you. You are such a pretty girl after all, and pure of heart’ he said to her. ‘There is nothing anyone can find about you that they will not like. You’re a good girl’ he said, caressing her cheek. ‘You know that right?’

The rest of the journey they made in complete silence. Jadon did not leave Valery’s side, but sat beside her for the rest of the way, until several hours later, the carriage slowed to a stop.

Valery’s heart sunk in her chest as she heard the noises from outside, muffled by the walls of the carriage. It seemed busy where they were now. Valery could smell the salt in the air, could feel the moisture around her. She knew they were at the harbour now, where a ship waited for her to take her across the sea, and to the kingdom far from here.

She felt sick to her stomach, and was gripped by a sudden sense of unreality. As Jadon left her side, rising to open the door of the carriage, she barely registered his movement.

There were calls from outside, and the carriage rocked as Jadon climbed out. He turned back, offering a hand to his sister to take, and she did so, acting mechanically without being fully aware of it.

She clambered out of the carriage, still holding her brothers hand, as several servants entered the carriage behind her, bringing out her luggage.

Jadon grasped his sisters hand firmly, he didn’t let go, as he walked with her down the harbour, with the servants following after them. The soldiers that followed the carriage for the entire journey, protecting the prince and the princess along the way, stationed themselves around the harbour, standing with vigilance, their weapons at hand.

Jadon approached the waiting ship moored to the harbour. At the end of the gangplank a group of men waited for them.

Valery had seen men like this before; they were the soldiers that guarded the palace she had grown up in. They had always seemed innocuous to her, almost like part of the scenery; she

had even grown to like them. But now, they terrified her. Now, they were the people who would be taking her to her new home, into a kingdom she had never been to before, to be married to a man she had never met. Valery was frightened. Would her new husband treat her as her father treated her mother? Could they ever love each other? Would he be kind to her, to the children they would one day have?

Valery clutched the toy tighter to her chest with one hand, with the other, she still held onto her brother.

‘Walter’ Jadon nodded to one of the men within the group of soldiers.

He was not a soldier himself, but appeared to be an official of some sorts. He carried a paper in his hand, and a quill to write with. He would be recording the journey as they travelled to the capital across the sea. Once the journey was complete, he would report back to Valery’s parents, so that they would know she arrived safely. And if anything went wrong, they would know that too, for the official would write everything down.

‘Your highness’ Walter bowed to Jadon, ‘my lady’ he acknowledged Valery briefly. ‘I trust you had a safe trip.’

Jadon sighed patiently. Valery knew that pleasantries bored him. But he played along, because he was expected to.

‘Thank you. Our trip was fine.’

‘Well I see no need to linger here’ Walter said, indicating the ship. ‘Are you ready to go my lady?’

Jadon answered for Valery, for which she was extremely grateful.

‘We will be a few moments’ Jadon told him shortly. ‘Get the luggage on board’ he told the servants behind him, who swiftly obeyed.

‘But your highness’ Walter bowed. ‘We are already set to go.’

‘Then get yourself on board’ Jadon told him. ‘I need to say goodbye to my sister.’

The official bowed his head respectfully; then made his way up the gangplank to wait on the ship, the soldiers that were with him followed. The soldiers all around them, the ones that had accompanied them on the journey here, remained at their posts, watching diligently the scene around them, in case there was any danger.

Jadon and Valery had only a brief moment alone together, the last they would ever have.

Jadon knelt before her, holding her hand tightly in his. She leapt at him, throwing her arms around him and squeezing as tightly as she could, as she felt his large arms wrap slowly around her body.

‘I don’t want to go’ she sobbed. ‘I don’t want to go.’

‘I know’ he mumbled to her. ‘But you must be strong.’

He held her by the shoulders, pushing her gently but firmly back so that he could look into her face again.

He brushed the tears from her cheek.

‘Be strong’ he whispered. ‘You are going to be queen soon. It’s what a queen should be.’

‘I’m sorry’ she said, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. ‘I cannot help it.’

‘I know.’

Jadon rose then, looking over her.

‘Goodbye sister. I will never forget you.’

He walked away then, before Valery had a chance to speak, to hesitate, or call him back.

One of the soldiers that had been lingering nearby approached her slowly then, keeping his head bowed respectfully.

‘Princess’ he spoke to her gently. ‘May I escort you to the ship?’

Valery didn’t answer him, but she turned away, staring towards the ship now. There she saw the official figure waiting for her, the other soldiers that had stepped onto the boat stood at different points, simply waiting.

Valery took a deep breath, before stepping forward. In her mind everything seemed to slow, as if she were walking through water. She moved up the gangplank, followed by the soldier who loomed behind her.

Valery turned as she stepped onto the ship. The gangplank was withdrawn, and the gates shut. Valery stared down at the harbour where Jadon stood, staring back at her. She was sure he was upset about seeing her go, he was probably devastated. The siblings had always been very close for their entire lives. But she knew that he would never show his weakness. He stood there with a proud posture, tall and mighty. One day he would inherit their father’s kingdom, and Valery was sure he would make a fine king, one that was strong, powerful, but merciful also. She regretted deeply that she would never see the day.

There were shouts from around her as the ship was made ready to sail. The rope that tied it to the harbour was unwound, and the ship drifted away from the dock. Valery stood on the deck; she reached forwards, grasping the wood before her firmly, and watching Jadon standing on the harbour. He dipped his head to her, as she did in turn.

Jadon turned on his heel, marching swiftly away. Valery’s heart tightened in her chest. Her lip trembled and she blinked quickly to clear her tears.

The official came up behind her, leaning forwards but keeping a respectful distance.

‘Princess’ he spoke gently. ‘Your quarters are ready for you.’

Valery didn’t answer. She stared hard at the harbour, at the point where last she had seen her brother.

‘Princess’ the official said again.

‘Alright’ Valery whispered, not trusting her voice. She clutched the doll tighter to her chest. The last gift from her mother. ‘I’m coming’ she said, turning to face the man behind her and keeping her head low, staring down at the floor so that he could not see her tears.

She followed the official down into the belly of the ship, where there was a large cabin that was prepared just for her. Valery stood on the threshold, the double doors either side of her were open, making the area seem more spacious. The room before her was comfortable and warm. The four-poster bed in the centre was draped in red velvet, with large square cushions at the head. There were no windows in the room; the darkness was kept at bay by burning lamps fixed to points all around the room. There was a chair and desk by one wall, a shelf of books; a giant painted globe in the corner, set on a half-circle and hovering above a silver platform.

Valery entered the room, her footsteps muffled by the thick brightly coloured rug that lay before the bed.

She gazed about the room.

‘This bell by the door’ the official said indicating it, ‘you can use to get attention. You can call for anything at all, any time in the day or night, no matter how trivial.’ He bowed his

head low. 'We know this is a difficult time for you, and we will do anything for you that we can. Remember that we are all at your service.'

Valery stared at the large brass bell, before her attention drifted back to the official.

'Thank you' she spoke quietly, 'but I think I would just like to be alone right now.'

'Of course princess' the official bowed.

He reached for the doors either side of him, closing them simultaneously as he backed out of the room.

The doors shut quietly, and Valery was alone.

The silence was deafening.

Valery hugged herself, still holding the doll.

She turned back to the room, looking all around her. And then she suddenly realised something.

'I don't know how long the journey will be' she mumbled to herself. 'I don't even know how long we will be at sea.'

She bowed her head, eyes shimmering with tears.

'I'm so tired' she sighed, lowering her arms as she moved over to the bed, allowing the doll to slip from her fingers. 'I'm so tired...'

She crawled over to the bed, collapsing on the soft sheets and hugging the pillow to her. She rested her head on the pillow, breathing a heavy sigh and closing her eyes. She slipped into a deep sleep, and when she next woke, it was dark outside the ship.

Valery sat on the bed for hours, leaning back against the head board and hugging the pillow to her. She was in a trance, with eyes glazed over and her mind far from where her body was. She remained in this state for quite some time, until there came a gentle knocking at the door, and Valery gradually returned to awareness.

The knocking came again, a muffled voice declared that they were about to enter.

Valery raised her head, as a young female servant entered the room, carrying a tray of food.

She looked to be about the same age as Valery, perhaps a little bit older.

Valery straightened as the servant closed the door carefully behind her, and approached the bed tentatively. She placed the tray on the table nearby, turning to the princess and holding her hands together before her, head bowed respectfully.

'I've been assigned as your personal handmaiden' the servant spoke softly. 'My name is Plum.'

'I have my own handmaiden?' Valery mumbled uncertainly.

'Yes' Plum nodded eagerly. 'It is normal for a queen to have her own handmaiden, expected even. You are to be a queen soon, when you marry' she added.

'Yes' Valery replied meekly. 'My mother had her own handmaiden.' She paused then. 'Did you say that your name was Plum?'

'I did' Plum gleamed, seemingly genuinely happy. 'It was originally a nickname my mother gave to me a long time ago. When I was younger, my friends called me that also, other people heard the name used to call me, and more and more people called me by that name.' Plum smiled widely. 'I hope we will be good friends in time. I was handpicked by your

brother to serve you, because our personalities match. I was chosen out of several hundred others. I am a gift to you.'

'My brother picked you?'

'Yes' Plum nodded. 'We spent a lot of time together before he finally chose me. He said that he was sure you and I would get along well. He was most confident in this.'

'If my brother said that, then I must trust him.' Valery looked ahead again, hugging her knees to her chest. 'My brother...gave you as a gift to me?'

'He did.'

'That was so good of him' Valery sighed. 'I love my brother. He was always kind to me...until the very end.'

Valery buried her face in her arms then, beginning to cry silently. She was surprised suddenly, as she felt a weight on the bed, as Plum placed her arms around her. Valery suddenly stopped crying.

'If there is anything I can do to make you happy' Plum said to her, 'please tell me what it is. I want to see you smile.'

Valery turned to her handmaiden, holding her back, in an action that was instinctive.

The two held each other, and for a moment, Valery felt comforted.

They remained on the ship for several days. For much of the time, Valery and Plum stayed together. Plum made Valery laugh from time to time, made her smile, and then when Valery wished to be alone, she would send her away.

One day, Valery stood on the deck, holding the doll to her chest, thinking deeply about her future.

'Is this how my mother came to the kingdom I was born in? Is this what she went through also?'

She saw a strange bird fly over the ship then, though she didn't know what it was. If she had asked one of the soldiers, they would have told her it was an albatross.

'So beautiful' Valery whispered, gazing enviously at it as it soared freely across the world, drifting lazily, as calmly as the clouds above. 'How I wish' Valery uttered, 'how I wish...'

Behind her, the official watched, sitting at the base of the sail mast with his paper and quill. He kept a close eye on Valery much of the time, as did the soldiers that were placed under his command. Everyone treated Valery very tenderly, always speaking gently to her, and offering her anything she asked for on the ship.

The journey was long and uneventful, when at last they reached the shore of the kingdom Valery was now bound to by fate, it was nightfall.

'Valery' her handmaiden spoke softly to her, shaking her gently awake. 'Valery. Open your eyes, we are here now. We've arrived.'

Valery sat up, gazing blearily about her. 'We're here?' she mumbled.

'Yes' Plum replied in a whisper. 'The ship is docked. It is late now, but we're leaving the ship and travelling to the palace by carriage.'

'Now?' Valery asked. 'Why not wait until morning?'

'You are expected to arrive at the palace as soon as possible' Plum said to her.

‘My husband to be is in this kingdom’ Valery mumbled. ‘The time until we meet can be counted in mere hours.’

‘Are you nervous?’ Plum asked her tentatively.

‘I’m terrified’ Valery whispered.

Plum embraced her then, holding her firmly to give her comfort. ‘I am here for you’ the handmaiden whispered. ‘Always, no matter what.’

They left the ship then. Valery shivered, hugging her cloak tightly to her, her doll she carried hidden beneath the cloak and clutched tightly in rigid fingers. Beside her Plum let out a sigh, her breath could be seen as a fog before her.

The two young women were escorted off the ship and led towards the carriage that waited at the harbour. The official climbed into the seat at the front beside the driver, and the soldiers took their positions around the carriage, each mounted on white horses. White horses were rare in the kingdoms, and only owned by royalty. Everyone would know who they were as they rode by.

Valery climbed into the carriage, followed by Plum. The mounted, armed and armoured soldiers took formation around the carriage, guarding all points around the princess. The driver of the carriage snapped the reins, and the carriage jolted into motion. Inside, Plum shuffled close to Valery, holding her arm tightly. Valery rested her hand upon her handmaiden’s. The two became still, leaning back and closing their eyes. The two began to drift into an uneasy sleep, woken occasionally by the jolts of the carriage as the wheels ran along the bumpy road.

Valery’s eyelids drooped again. She allowed her body to relax, resting her cheek against Plum’s head; her handmaiden rested her head on Valery’s shoulder.

Outside the carriage, the sun began to rise.

Back at the palace, Cam was confronted by one of the council members.

‘She will be here’ Castello told him, ‘in two days time.’

‘Two days?’ Cam echoed nervously. ‘That’s so soon.’

‘It is’ the right hand of the king nodded. He turned, sweeping his cloak behind him as he sat back against the banister. Tilting his head, he considered the young king. ‘You will be married swiftly to her’ he continued, ‘when she arrives, within the fortnight.’ He paused. ‘Do you understand?’

‘I do’ Cam replied sombrely.

‘Make yourself presentable’ Castello told him. ‘You want to look your best, for when she arrives.’

‘Of course’ Cam nodded, bowing his head to the council member. ‘I will do just that.’

Valery had slept for as long as she could. If sleep is what you could call it. The journey had been uneventful. The carriage trundled onwards and with every passing minute, the princess drew closer to her new home.

But that is not what she thought of now. For the time being, her mind was free of anxiety, was free of worry, and she played games with her handmaiden, whom in the short time she had known, had grown very fond of.

‘My brother was right’ Valery smiled, placing a card down on the little fold out table that was between them. ‘You were the right choice in the end.’

‘I’m so glad you think so’ Plum beamed back at her, placing her own card down on top of Valery’s. ‘Black stripe’ she said with a grin.

‘Oh’ Valery huffed in annoyance. ‘You got me again.’

‘It does take some practice’ Plum told her, gathering up the cards again and shuffling them. ‘I used to play a lot with my parents. My father was excellent at this game. I was only able to beat him once. I used to get so mad. No matter how hard I tried...’

‘Tell me about your family’ Valery spoke then, leaning forwards in her seat, the doll she carried rested on her lap. ‘What are they like?’

‘Wonderful’ Plum grinned. ‘I have long held the thought that I have had the best family in the world. My brother and my little sister too...we all got along so well, and if something was wrong, we would work together and support each other, and try hard to make everything right again.’

‘It sounds lovely’ Valery sighed, feeling a little envious. She felt a twinge in her heart then. ‘I just thought of something. How long will you be my handmaiden for?’

‘Well’ Plum replied thoughtfully, putting the cards away and folding up the table, ‘I’m not really sure, for as long as you want me I suppose.’

‘Then perhaps I should release you from my service’ Valery thought aloud, ‘so that you can see your family again. They must live in the kingdom we’ve just come from. It’s a long journey; I would feel terrible if I knew I was taking you away from them.’

‘Oh no princess’ Plum waved her hands at her. ‘It’s not like that. Your brother bought me for a very handsome price. My being here means my family will be very well off for a very long time. And besides’ she added, ‘I am bound to a contract for at least ten years.’

‘Ten years?!’

‘Yes’ Plum nodded happily. ‘And as long as you are kind to me, which I’m sure you will be, I see no problem with this.’

‘But what about your family?’

‘Well...of course I will miss them...but...it was my choice to come here. We were always happy, but we often struggled for money. I chose to come here...for them. They didn’t want to let me go when your brother started to show an interest in me, but I insisted. The money would help each of them live better lives...would help them chase their dreams...’

‘But I heard money can ruin lives’ Valery said. ‘People without money get jealous, and people with the money get greedy.’

‘I am fully aware of that’ Plum smiled. ‘But my family are careful. I have every confidence that they will be discreet about it. No one will know.’

‘I do hope you’re right’ Valery sighed. ‘Money...especially gaining such a vast amount so suddenly, can do terrible things.....I’ve heard stories...’

‘It’s alright’ Plum reassured. ‘My family will be accepting payments in modest amounts each month. They will be fine. I promise.’

‘And what about you?’ Valery asked. ‘You will see none of this wealth.’

‘Wealth is not what interests me’ Plum grinned slyly.

‘Then what?’

Her handmaiden raised her head. ‘I want to see the world’ she breathed. ‘I lived in a small village, in a happy life, but boring, in a place where nothing ever changed.’

‘Well’ Valery sighed. ‘Change is only good if it makes things better.’

‘Of course’ Plum bowed her head. ‘But...I want to travel. I want to see other kingdoms, visit the palaces and see their magnificence for myself. I’ve...only heard about them, these fabulous buildings the kings and queens live in, they are like legends in my village.’

‘They’re not that great’ Valery sighed. ‘A jewel is pretty, but it can’t feed you, it can’t keep you warm or give you shelter.’

‘That is certainly true’ Plum sighed, ‘but they are *beautiful*...’

A silence passed between them as Plum turned to gaze out of the window. Valery leant back in her seat, holding the doll with both hands now. She stared down at it, with its mop of black hair and its pretty red and white dress. It was a simple toy, but she loved it.

She stared at it for several minutes, her mind beginning to drift away.

Not long now she realised, *perhaps just a few more hours*.

She thought then how much she wanted to get out of the carriage. The space felt cramped now, and she had long since grown tired of the interior. She wanted to stand up, to walk around outside a bit and stretch her legs.

Not long now she thought. *Not long now*.

Her handmaiden suddenly gasped, staring out of the window. Valery raised her head, seeing Plum’s eyes were wide open.

‘What is it?’ Valery asked tentatively. ‘What’s wrong?’

Plum didn’t reply, she only continued to stare outside. From where she sat in the carriage, the handmaiden was able to see from an angle that Valery could not. She sat there, frozen and unresponsive.

‘Plum?’ Valery’s voice wavered as she spoke.

Plum suddenly turned to her, grabbing the short red curtains and drawing them shut over the window. ‘*Don’t look!*’ she hissed.

Valery’s heart stopped in her chest, and she suddenly felt very afraid. A feeling she had never experienced before.

And then she heard the noises.

There was a commotion outside.

Valery couldn’t identify the sounds at first, but then she slowly began to recognise them.

Cries of men, the scream of a horse, the sing of metal as a sword was drawn from its sheath, the sound of falling bodies, shouts of confusion as orders were thrown about.

It was chaos outside.

Plum moved quickly over to sit beside Valery, holding her in her arms and putting herself between the princess and the carriage door.

‘Stay calm’ the handmaiden said to her. ‘Stay calm.’

‘What’s happening?’ Valery pleaded.

‘Just start praying!’ Plum shouted back, holding her tight.

Her tone frightened Valery even more, and she suddenly realised that Plum was terrified.

Valery squeezed her eyes tight shut, trying to block out the sounds of dying outside.

Please my gods protect me...

Moments later the carriage door opened suddenly and Valery and Plum both gasped in fear, drawing back as far as they could into the corner of the carriage.

Valery peered wide eyed around Plum's arm, seeing a man standing before them, leaning into the carriage.

He was dressed in shabby clothes, travelling clothes, well worn and dishevelled and dark in colour. He looked like a vagrant. There was blood speckled on his face and clothes, but it was clear at a glance that it was not his own.

He smiled at the terrified princess and handmaiden, grasping the doorframe of the carriage either side with both hands.

'Hello ladies' he declared, before climbing in and sitting in the seat opposite them.

The carriage rocked as he sat heavily down. Plum continued to hold Valery, the two frozen in fear, as they stared wide eyed back at the stranger.

The stranger pulled his sword out, and Valery gave a small shriek. The stranger looked up at her carelessly, whipping out a cloth hidden on his person and beginning to clean the blade.

'Oh stop that' he scolded. 'I'm not going to hurt you. Honest.'

'Vlad!' came a voice from outside. 'Are you in there?'

Another figure appeared, standing before the open carriage door and gazing in. This figure was young; his whole demeanour appeared to be gentler than the man already in the carriage with them.

'Hey Royce' the man named Vlad replied. 'How are you doing?'

'I hope you're not scaring them' Royce glared. 'Put that sword away!' He turned to speak to the girls now. 'I'm sorry to have frightened you' Royce said to them. 'We are the ones who are here to protect you.'

'What's going on?' Valery cried.

'We've been following your carriage for hours now' Royce told her. 'Your soldiers were ambushed by another party. Our leader thought this might happen, and ordered us to keep watch over you.'

'W-what?' Valery stammered.

Vlad leant forwards then, causing Valery and Plum to flinch. He smiled at this, leaning back slightly.

'We are here to protect you' Vlad said to them.

'Who...' Valery began, '...who ordered you to keep watch over this carriage?'

'The queen in this kingdom' Royce told her. 'She ordered us to watch over you. And it's a good thing that we did.'

Valery and Plum exchanged a glance. They relaxed a little.

'The queen?' Valery repeated. 'But...who would attack us?'

'We've got our suspicions' Vlad growled. 'There is a lot that must be explained to you' Vlad went on. 'A lot has changed since the last king died. We here are all loyal to the old king, and detest the corruption that had infected this land. It will take a long time to explain.'

Royce closed the carriage door, and the carriage jolted into motion again.

'Where is the official?' Valery asked. 'He is expected to return to my parents to tell them that I have arrived safely.'

'He's fine' Vlad replied simply.

He reached forward, drawing back the curtains and allowing the light to flood into the carriage again.

Valery peered tentatively out of the window, seeing the bodies of the men that had accompanied her lying scattered on the ground, amongst the bodies of men whom she did not recognise. The two groups could easily be told apart. The soldiers that had guarded her were finely dressed in their royal armour. The men that had attacked them; greater in number, wore dark armour made of leather.

Vlad leant back in his seat as the carriage rolled on. The view of the dead men passed them by, and Vlad began to speak.

‘When our last king, Carl was his name, was alive, life was good. Since his death everything has changed, and our kingdom is now corrupt.’ Vlad crossed his arms, bowing his head and closing his eyes. ‘It all began’ Vlad grumbled, ‘when our last king died...’

Valery listened, clutching the doll to her chest with one hand, with the other, she held onto Plum’s tightly.

Vlad continued to speak, and the carriage continued on, as if nothing had happened.

They arrived at the palace later that day. Valery stared through the window at the city beyond the carriage. Vlad had told her the whole story so far, and she saw everything in a different light now.

She was even more afraid than she had been before, but now, at least she was prepared. The carriage turned to the side in the street, and Valery saw a better view of the palace.

The palace was a tall building. From a distance it looked as if it were made of glass, built with many towers topped with sharp steeples that grew high into the sky like spears. A pale and in some places transparent building, that almost looked as if it had been built on the clouds, alongside the angels that sang there. It was a striking construction, ornate, eloquent and breathtaking, and for a moment, Valery was reminded of her own home.

The carriage rolled up to the palace. The grand gates were opened for the carriage to enter, and as they did, Valery opened the window, leaning out to gaze up at the mighty building that towered over them.

‘So what do you think?’ Vlad asked them as he watched the princess and the handmaiden lean out of the window.

‘What do I think?’ Valery echoed. ‘I don’t know yet’ she said. ‘How can I be sure?’

The carriage slowed to a stop, and a few seconds later the door was opened.

Vlad leant back in his seat with his arms crossed, watching the two girls closely.

‘It is time’ he said.

Valery drew a slow and steady breath, gritting her teeth and trying hard to stop her hands from shaking.

‘Can you come with me?’ she asked him.

‘Me?’ Vlad replied. He smirked then. ‘Do you trust me now?’

‘I trust no one’ Valery replied, ‘especially not after what’s happened. But you...are at least somewhat trustworthy.’

Vlad smiled again. ‘That is very wise of you, but I cannot’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. You will be perfectly safe once you’re inside the palace. For today at least. But I...strictly speaking, am not even allowed in this carriage.’

‘But...’ Valery began.

‘You’ll be perfectly safe’ Vlad reassured her. ‘I didn’t miss my breakfast in order to save you earlier today, only to let it all go to waste. Now go’ he nodded to her. ‘The men are waiting for you.’

Valery turned from him, and leaned tentatively out of the carriage, seeing waiting outside, the official that had accompanied her from her old home. At least he was alive after all as she had been promised.

‘Princess’ the official bowed to her. ‘It’s time to see your new home.’

‘Go on’ Vlad prompted, seeing her hesitate. ‘All will be well.’

‘Do you promise?’ she asked him.

‘We have our own men within the palace’ Vlad told her. ‘They are all loyal to the queen, who wishes to protect you.’ He paused then. ‘Those men are more appropriately dressed than myself. I am not welcome there. At least not looking like this.’

Valery glanced down at his scruffy clothes.

‘I see’ she mumbled.

‘Go on’ Vlad prompted again. ‘All will be well.’

Valery looked up at him.

‘It’s alright’ Plum smiled encouragingly to her. ‘I will always stay close to you. We mustn’t keep them waiting.’

Valery nodded firmly. Holding the doll with one hand, she gripped the side of the carriage, climbing out and standing straight for the first time in hours. It felt so good to get out of that carriage, her body had become stiff and she ached all over. But she was finally able to stretch now.

Valery blinked, exhaling slowly.

The official with his paper and quill approached her.

‘If you would like to follow me’ the official said with a bow.

‘Of course’ Valery sighed wearily.

‘Hey!’ Vlad called out from inside the carriage as the group began to walk away.

Valery glanced back at him, but he was looking at the official.

‘Whatever your name is’ Vlad said to the nervous looking official, ‘I know you’re supposed to report back to the kingdom where you came from. But it would be an unpleasant thing if your king and queen were to learn of this little hiccup. We saved your life and chose to keep you alive because we know you will report when you return that you had *a safe journey* that was *completely uneventful*.’ Vlad narrowed his eyes. ‘Isn’t that right?’ he added in a threatening manner, speaking very slowly.

The official stared back uncertainly at the mercenary.

‘Remember’ Vlad teased him, ‘it’s just as easy to take a life as it is to spare one.’

The official smiled submissively then, bowing to the mercenary in a show of respect.

‘Nothing happened’ the official said. ‘It was such a peaceful and dull journey that I fell asleep for most of it.’

Vlad leant back in the carriage falling silent.

‘Don’t you forget it...’ were his final words.

The official bowed again. He turned from the carriage, and strode up the steps towards the doors of the palace, which were being held open and guarded by armed soldiers.

Servants hurried forwards to take the princess's luggage from the carriage, sparing Vlad nervous glances as they did.

Valery spared him one last look as he stared back at her, before she turned and followed after the official who was waiting for them at the top of the steps.

Valery heard the carriage door slam shut, a sound of such finality, it filled Valery with dread. She listened to the sound of the carriage being driven off. Her last tie to home.

No going back. There's no going back...

'Come princess' Plum beamed at her, pausing halfway up the steps and turning back.

Valery looked up at her handmaiden, not realising she had paused.

'Alright' she sighed. 'I'm coming.'

Valery bowed her head, making her way up the steps to join Plum. Her handmaiden took her gently by the arm, hugging her as they walked together.

They followed the official into the tall palace, and the entrance hall within. The soldiers that guarded the door, moved as one, closing the doors after her. The slamming sound of wood against wood rang out in the empty halls as Valery gazed about her.

There was so much open space around, and above her, balconies and walkways and stairs and stairs and so many stairs. Valery wondered for a moment if heaven could be reached from the top of the highest tower.

The palace was bright of colours, and everything was light. The balustrades, many of which she saw, looked as if they were made of glass.

It was then that Valery noticed, all the windows in the great hall around them were warped, so that sunlight could seep in, but nothing could be seen in or out.

There were two figures waiting for them. Their names were Heremon and Rhona, two members of the council, and left hands of the king.

'Princess' Heremon bowed low to her. 'We are honoured.' He hesitated then. 'Did you not bring with you any soldiers?'

Valery hesitated. The official that had travelled with them paused, watching Valery expectantly. He was about to answer for her, when Valery spoke.

'We chose not to bring soldiers with us' Valery answered bravely. 'We have no need. This kingdom is safe after all.'

Heremon stared at her, lost for words for a moment.

'Of course' he said at last. 'You are of course right.'

He knows this is a dangerous place Valery realised, seeing it in his face. *Did my parents have any idea.....no.....how could they....?*

'I am glad to be here' Valery spoke clearly.

Heremon bowed.

'Follow me please' he said. 'I will introduce you to our king.'

Heremon turned to Rhona beside him, speaking to him briefly.

'Inform the others.'

Rhona nodded, turning and striding away.

'Come' Heremon spoke politely to the princess as Rhona went away. 'It's this way.'

Three of the council members met in the hall somewhere in the palace, deep in discussion. They were approached by a messenger, who relayed information to them passed onto him by Rhona.

‘What?’ Brioke spat, utterly livid and hearing these words.

‘Um...’ the young messenger began uncertainly. ‘The young princess has arrived.’

Either side of Brioke, Lamont and Eden exchanged a glance.

Brioke began to tremble in fury, balling his fists.

He turned on his heel and strode away, Lamont and Eden and the young messenger watching him as he went.

Cam was in his bedroom at this time, sitting at his desk with his book open before him. He was deeply enveloped in the story that he read, a story with the most fabulous magic, where mages constructed whole cities out of stone, froze the surface of the ocean to create passage, could reach the very clouds themselves.

‘If only we lived in such a world’ Cam sighed at one point, continuing to read.

He stayed in his room for hours, reading in complete silence, until the door to his room was thrown open.

Cam jerked his head up, seeing Brioke standing there, eyes bloodshot red from anger.

Cam was instantly terrified, rising from his chair as Brioke started towards him. He grabbed Cam around the throat, slamming his head into the desk.

‘Why are you doing this?!’ Cam called to him.

‘*I know what you did*’ Brioke hissed into his ear, bearing over him. ‘You killed my men.’

‘What men?!’

‘The princess is here.’

‘What?!’

Brioke pulled him back from the desk, before slamming his head down again and throwing him across the room.

Cam fell on his back, backing away from Brioke in his panic as he advanced towards him, glancing desperately at the door that was behind Brioke.

Brioke grabbed Cam by the throat, lifting him up and shoving him against the wall.

‘*What have I done?!*’ Cam sobbed as he held him there. ‘*What have I done?!*’

‘You killed my men’ Brioke growled.

‘...No.....’

Brioke grabbed Cam’s head and brought it down, swiftly lifting his knee as he did this and smacking Cam in the face. Cam’s head snapped back as blood gushed from his nose. He collapsed as Brioke went for him again, using all of his strength as he kicked and beat him, doing so for many seconds. Cam tried to curl up to protect himself, but there was no getting away.

Brioke at last relented, stepping back and breathing heavily. Cam heaved himself up, spitting out bloodied teeth before he was grabbed again and dragged back across the room and to the corridor outside.

Cam was hardly aware of what was happening, confused and in pain. Brioke had hurt him in the past, but he had never been as aggressive as this before. Cam was only just realising what

was happening, when Brioke pulled him straight then, leaning him back over the balustrade. Cam pawed desperately at Brioke's arms as he realised they were on the balcony. But his grip was too weak, and Cam was thrown over the edge, and to the level below.

Interlude start

The masked figure shook his head.

'Fight back' Reuben urged. 'Why don't you fight back?'

'Is he alive?' Isami asked beside him.

'I don't know.'

The two watched the screen for a while. Perhaps ten minutes or so passed before Cam was found.

Reuben and Isami watched the monitor as the figure that had found him called out for help, and others appeared on the scene.

Reuben raised his head, staring closely. 'I think he's alive' he droned. 'They wouldn't take a dead man to the healers.'

Isami let out a heavy sigh, sitting back in her chair.

'Incredible' she said, 'for him to have survived that fall, I was certain that he would have died.'

'Things are getting worse now' Reuben said. 'Brioke has never tried to kill him before.'

A silence passed.

'How's Raksha?' Isami asked suddenly.

'Still refusing us' Reuben answered offhandedly. He leant forwards upon the control panel, staring at the screen without emotion.

'I thought you would have changed by now' the Reuben said sadly to the unconscious figure before him. 'But even after all of these years, you continue to choose to play the victim.'

A third figure entered the room dramatically, sliding across the smooth floor with his arms out to balance him.

'Hey fellas!' he declared loudly.

'Venus' Isami smiled. 'You're back.'

'No' he turned to her, removing his mask. 'I go by another name now.'

'And what is that now?' Isami asked dryly.

'Vergil' he said.

'Why do you change your name so often?' Reuben said.

'Because I can' Vergil answered simply, throwing his arms out happily. 'Because I want to!'

Reuben and Isami tensed suddenly, hearing a strange noise so out of place in their home. They had just identified it, when it came around the corner, following Vergil instinctively.

'Is that a donkey?' Isami said in surprise.

'What's it carrying?' Reuben asked, seeing the poor unfortunate creature laden with all sorts of things.

‘Weapons, armour, gold, anything that’s worth anything’ Vergil sang happily. ‘And I also got this’ he said, throwing his black cloak open and revealing beneath it a full suit of armour and chainmail. ‘And this’ he said, brining out a modern day camera. ‘And this’ he pulled, out a sombrero, throwing it on the floor and beginning to dance around it, playing the appropriate music on an iPod and shaking some maracas. ‘Olay!’

‘Why would you take all that stuff’ Reuben asked him frowning.

‘As souvenirs’ Vergil winked happily.

‘You’re going crazy’ Isami told him.

‘You want to see something crazy?’ Vergil descended upon her, sweeping her up in his arms and kissing her passionately.

When he finally released her, she was gasping deeply, cheeks flushed.

‘What are you watching?’ Vergil asked as his attention drifted towards the screen above them, completely ignoring Isami from then on. ‘Oh. It’s him again.’ he paused. ‘Isn’t that the prince?’

‘He’s a king now’ Reuben said, as Isami gathered herself, slowly recovering.

The three watched in silence the scene on the monitor.

‘He’s still....’ Vergil began, the other two both turned to him as he became lost for words.

Vergil sighed, smiling suddenly.

‘Why don’t we help him?’ Vergil suggested.

‘How?’ Isami asked.

‘I know’ Vergil spoke up. He began to type furiously upon the keyboard.

‘What are you doing?’ Isami asked.

‘I’ve known this prince for sometime Vergil said as he continued to type. ‘Though I admit for a long while I completely forgot about him...but I think I know what to do.’

‘What?’ Isami said.

‘The prince...the king...’ he continued, ‘he’s been in the same situation since he was a child.’

Vergil paused. ‘I think I know what to do that could push him over the edge.’

‘Why do you want to push him over the edge?’ Reuben asked.

‘To force him to break this cycle of abuse’ Vergil said. ‘Or else it will continue for the rest of his life.....or until it kills him.’

He pressed the ‘enter command’ button.

The three of them lifted their heads, watching the screen expectantly.

‘Shouldn’t we wait until after he is healed?’ Isami suggested casually.

‘Yes’ Vergil said, realising this as if it weren’t obvious. ‘I’ve put a delay on the command.

There,’ he said pressing it. ‘But it will happen soon’ he added, ‘very soon...a thing to push him over the edge.’

Interlude end

Heremon led the princess through the palace, behind the princess walked her handmaiden and the official, carrying as always his paper and quill.

They came to a certain spot within the palace, and Heremon asked them to wait. He went away, and the three waited in silence.

The minutes passed.

‘Is it normal to be left like this?’ Valery asked after a time.

The official behind her shifted uncomfortably.

Valery turned to him, facing him head on. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘I don’t know’ the official replied. ‘I’m not terribly familiar with the customs in this kingdom.’

Valery’s attention drifted away from him. She held her doll with both hands, wandering away and coming to sit upon a red velvet lined bench made of white stone that was nearby.

Plum leant against the wall, holding both hands before her.

The official bowed his head, scribbling on his parchment.

The three waited for several minutes, until Heremon returned.

‘Follow me.’

Valery knew something was very wrong, she could hear it in his voice, could see it in his body language.

She rose from her seat, following after him as he marched swiftly away. She didn’t notice the two figures of her handmaiden and the official trailing after her.

They walked for some time, at last stopping before a door. Heremon opened the small door, leading the others inside.

Valery’s heart slowly tightened in her chest as she stepped into the room. It was clear at a glance that this room was a healing room. The stone floors were smooth, and the room was bare, save for a basic wooden bed in the centre that looks like an operating table. By the wall there was a cabinet, through the glass doors could be seen bottles of medicine and medical tools and bandages. There was a sink in the corner, and metal dishes piled up beside it. And by the back wall, immediately opposite the door and below the warped glass of the window, was a simple wooded bed, upon which lay a man.

Heremon hovered by the door, watching as Valery slowly approached the figure.

Behind Valery, the official scribbled on the paper one last time.

‘Arrived safely’ the official mumbled, ‘nothing out of the ordinary. If you would permit me’ he bowed to Valery, ‘I would take your leave.’

Valery glanced back at him, giving him a quiet nod.

The official bowed again, turning and striding out of the room.

Heremon stared into the room, hesitating for a moment, before turning away, slipping out of the room himself and closing the door after him.

Alone in the room now with only her handmaiden standing a short distance away, Valery stepped closer to the king, until she was standing beside his bed.

He lay on the bed unconscious. One eye was heavily bruised and swollen shut, and there was a large bump and a deep gash on his forehead, the blood had run down the side of his face and dried there. There was blood all around his nose and mouth, he had bled profusely. There were cuts and bruises on his cheeks and chin and as Valery looked closer, she could see the edges of another bruise upon his shoulder beneath his shirt. No doubt he had more injuries that could not be seen.

Valery's hand went to her mouth in shock as she stared at him. If it wasn't for the gentle rising and falling of his chest, she would have believed he was already dead.

'What happened to him?' she uttered.

Suddenly the door behind them opened and a female figure came striding into the room.

Valery stared wide eyed as the woman approached. She backed away sharply as the woman marched up to Cam and stopped beside his bed, staring down at him and completely ignoring Valery and anyone else.

For the longest time she did nothing, only stood and stared, with no expression upon her face. And then she turned to face Valery, acknowledging her at last.

'You must be Valery' she said at length.

'I am' Valery spoke firmly, sounding more confident than she felt.

Miranda turned back to Cam. 'I am the queen' she said. 'My name is Miranda. And this is my son.'

'My...husband....?'

Miranda turned around, placing her hand gently upon Valery's shoulder.

She walked with her from the room, the handmaiden Plum followed silently after, head bowed and hands together.

They exited the room, leaving Cam alone. But he was not forgotten. Miranda ordered several soldiers to guard him, and let no one enter, save for herself, and Luke.

'Poor Luke' Miranda lamented as she walked away with Valery down the corridor. 'He does not know yet what has happened. This will be quite a shock for him.'

Many minutes later, as soon as Luke found out what had befallen his dear brother, he rushed to see him, finding him unconscious still.

Cam woke slowly to the sound of distant shouting. He opened his better eye, recognising his brother's voice, screaming at the top of his lungs.

'WHAT FUCKING GOOD ARE YOU THEN?! HOW COULD YOU LEAVE HIM UNATTENDED?! HOW?! THERE SHOULD BE HEALERS HERE! WHY HASN'T HE BEEN SEEN TO?'

Cam didn't hear the frightened reply from the quiet voice. But the response seemed to only anger Luke further.

'I'LL SEE YOU FLAYED ALIVE FOR THIS! YOU HEAR ME?! I WON'T FORGET THIS!'

Then came the sound of a door slamming, then silence.

Cam stared dully up at the ceiling, unresponsive, feeling nothing inside.

He listened for several moments, at first hearing nothing. And then he heard footsteps.

The footsteps stopped beside him.

Cam turned his head slowly to one side, seeing Luke standing over him. Cam blinked several times, trying to clear the blood from around his eyes, trying to see clearly. But everything was blurred. He only knew that it was Luke standing beside him, because he had heard his voice.

Luke drew a sudden sharp intake of breath, his shoulders trembling. Cam realised suddenly he was crying.

‘Oh Cam...’ Luke whispered, kneeling beside his bed, grasping the sheets and staring at him. ‘I’m so sorry this happened to you...’

Cam stared at the blurred outline of his brother, his one good eye only half open. The white of his eye was now bright red.

Cam looked away.

‘Cam?’ Luke whispered. ‘Oh Cam...please say something...’

Cam breathed slowly, taking a deep breath, and then another. He made a noise in his throat, a croak, and then he began to cough, clearing the blood from inside him. This caused him to grimace in pain, and he tensed suddenly, balling his fists. All over his body was agony.

Luke leant forward, resting on his elbows and grasping the sheets in his hands. He bowed his head as Cam gradually relaxed, the immediate pain ebbing away.

Cam listened to Luke crying then, listened to him cursing himself, cursing everyone else, cursing the council.

‘*They did this*’ Luke hissed under his breath. ‘*I know they did. It’s all their fault.*’ He shook his head then. ‘I should have been there for you. I should have....’

Cam turned his head slowly towards Luke again. He spoke to his brother, doing so in a whisper.

‘...water.’

Luke tensed then, hearing this. He rose and swiftly walked away, returning to Cam’s side quickly.

Luke helped Cam sit up in bed, the movement causing him great discomfort. Cam relaxed slowly as the pain subsided. Luke supported Cam by holding gently the back of his head; holding the cup to his lips and helping him drink, taking the cup away when Cam was done. Luke went away as Cam sat back in bed again. When Luke returned, he carried with him a bowl of water and a clean cloth.

Cam couldn’t see what his brother was doing, but he knew when he heard the cloth being dunked into the water, heard the sound of the cloth being squeezed, heard the water trickle back into the bowl.

Luke raised the cloth in his hand, leaning over Cam.

‘I’m going to be as gentle as I can’ he spoke clearly but softly to him. ‘Ok?’

Cam didn’t reply. He didn’t object, so Luke took that as an understanding.

He dabbed the wet cloth against his skin, washing the dried blood from his face. Cam sighing and closing his good eye as Luke did this.

The water was cold.

It took a while. Luke did this as carefully as he could. When he had washed Cam’s face, he asked to look inside his mouth.

Cam opened his mouth, and Luke tilted his head as he observed, pulling back Cam’s upper lip gently. He saw that several teeth were missing.

After this, Luke washed and examined the rest of Cam’s body, cutting away his clothes so that Cam did not have to move.

When he was done, Luke brought blankets, draping them over Cam to warm his now cool skin.

‘I’ll come back later with food’ Luke spoke quietly to him. ‘I will order several men to guard this room. I won’t be long. Ok?’

Cam only blinked slowly in response, and so Luke left him be.
Alone in the silence once more, Cam closed his good eye, allowing his body to relax.
He slipped into a deep sleep.

‘I trust my man explained everything to you’ Miranda was saying to Valery.
They were in another room now; it looked like a small meeting room. Miranda smiled at Valery as she gazed about.
‘It’s alright’ Miranda reassured her, guessing her thoughts. ‘This room is a secret room, it rarely gets visited. Even the servants don’t come here. Just look at the dust on the table.’
Valery glanced down then, seeing a layer of dust on the marble table she sat at.
Miranda turned away, gliding across the room and towards the drinks cabinet, a tall and narrow piece set in the corner of the room. She opened the doors, sifting through what was inside.
‘Fine vintage’ she mumbled under her breath, lifting one bottle after the other and examining it. ‘Old. A fine brew.’
She turned back to Valery, holding a chosen bottle and two wine glasses in her hands.
She sauntered up to Valery then, placing the glasses before her.
‘Oh no’ Valery said politely shaking her head. ‘I don’t drink.’
‘You have to’ Miranda answered shortly. ‘You’ll get used to it. You’ll need it.’
Miranda poured wine into the first glass, her hand trembling slightly as she did. She glanced up at the handmaiden who stood by the door, hands together and head bowed as if wishing to remain invisible.
‘Come over here’ Miranda said to her. ‘I don’t like to treat the servants like servants, especially those that don’t belong to that dreadful council.’
Plum glanced up nervously, hesitating, unsure of whether or not she should listen to another’s command.
‘It’s alright’ Miranda sighed. ‘We’re all friends here.’
Plum stepped forward carefully, taking a seat beside Valery.
‘I’ll tell you the same thing I told my old handmaiden before she died’ Miranda said. ‘Look at me and speak up. You are not a mouse.’
‘Of course your highness’ Plum dared, meeting her eye.
‘And smile’ Miranda finished, ‘if you can.’
Plum gave the queen a weak smile.
Miranda glanced down.
‘I would like us all to stick together’ she began, pouring the wine into the second glass.
‘Here’ she said, pushing the glass towards the handmaiden.
‘Oh couldn’t possibly...’
‘Why not?’ Miranda said shortly. ‘You drink don’t you?’
‘Well...yes...’
‘I am not the type of queen most would expect me to be’ Miranda sighed, moving away.
‘What about you?’ Plum asked, taking the glass tentatively in her hands. ‘Are you not having one yourself?’
Miranda turned back to her, indicating the bottle she held.
‘Drink’ she said to the handmaiden. ‘It will help you relax.’

Plum did so quietly, taking a little sip from the glass as Miranda took a deep swig straight from the bottle. Miranda groaned loudly, sitting back in her seat and putting her feet up on the chair beside her.

Valery watched her silently, having not touched her wine yet. She watched the queen, resting her hands upon the doll in her lap.

Miranda took another deep gulp from the bottle before lowering it and resting it in her lap.

‘You wish to ask a question?’ Miranda said, seeing Valery more closely. ‘I’m sure you do. I was in your exact same position once, sold like cattle by my parents to a stranger, raped every night until I fell pregnant and forced to bear not one but two children I did not want and being trapped in a loveless marriage...I couldn’t even love my own children...as terrible a thing it is to say and hear, I don’t see my own children as a mother should.’

‘Why do you shake like that?’

Miranda paused suddenly, caught off guard.

She lifted a hand before her, staring at her palm. Her hand and arm trembled, an action she could no longer control.

She smirked humourlessly, before lowering her hand and looking past her bottle towards the young princess.

‘I want to assure you that you are....’ she fell silent, and smirked again. ‘I was poisoned’ Miranda finished bluntly. ‘The second attempt on my life by the council that came close to succeeding.’

‘The council tried to kill you?’ Valery breathed, ‘they tried to kill me too.....so what I was told by that man was true.’

‘My man’ Miranda told her. ‘It’s a great thing that there are still some who are loyal to the old king and who wish to make things better. If it wasn’t for them, I would have been killed long ago.’

‘Am I safe here?’ Valery whispered, fighting back her fears.

‘I don’t know’ Miranda mumbled, speaking the truth. ‘I cannot say. But the sooner you marry my son and have children...well....’ She turned her head away. ‘It’s the reason why you’re here, to strengthen the family and the crown by having children.....lucky you....’ She finished in a drone.

Miranda took another deep swig from her bottle.

‘You may love your children’ the queen went on. ‘I hear most mothers do, but for some reason I was an exception. And my son...’ Miranda paused then, turning her head back and meeting the princess’s eyes. ‘He is kind. Whether or not you fall in love with him is up to you. We cannot force ourselves to love anyone. But I am sure at least you will like him as a person, will grow fond of him, will think of him as a good friend....except of course when you have to....you know....and then you can go back to being friends again. If that’s what you want.’

‘You are nothing like what I thought I queen would be’ Valery mumbled.

‘Welcome to the real world’ Miranda replied dryly.

Interlude start

The siege had lasted weeks, but in the end, Raksha was victorious, as she knew she would be. Many of her men had been cut down, however none of which were alive. The dead shells of the corpses she had controlled with her magic lay scattered at her feet as she marched through the white streets of the city that was now hers. Her men, her own men who lived and breathed, she had managed to keep safe. Not a single man she had lost. They had of course taken part in the battle and fought for her. But she had sent in the undead men first to clear the path, so that her own men could follow after.

‘You have achieved a great thing’ one of her men bowed to her, her second in command, her General and the soldier she trusted the most.

‘Yes’ Raksha sighed; eyes glaze over as she gazed about. ‘We are safe now.’ She turned her head one side, then the other. ‘Gather the bodies’ she ordered. ‘Pile them up outside the city and burn them.’

‘Yes’ her General replied.

Raksha tilted her head back, inspecting the buildings around her.

‘The city is empty’ she began to speak in a quiet voice, though the soldiers around her held onto every word. ‘The people have fled, and I am going to find a place to stay.’

‘What about the hostages?’ the General asked.

‘Kill them all. We need to show our enemies who we really are.’

The General nodded. ‘Of course.’

Raksha strode away, as her men behind her moved to obey. Raksha’s stride was fast, and her steps wide. She came to the edge of the city, standing before the wall and looking out to the lower levels below.

They had conquered this city, this was *her* city now.

‘I’ve done it’ Raksha whispered to herself. ‘I’ve done it.’

She turned away from the magnificent view, away from the strong wind that buffeted her clothes and hair, and back to the narrow streets of the tall city.

It was utterly silent. Nothing moved in the streets. It was as if the city had become frozen in time.

Raksha paused then, lifting her head up to the branch of a tree that grew over the top of one of the homes nearby, seeing built there a little nest. It appeared to be empty.

Raksha looked ahead again, turning away from the tree. She walked the streets of the town for several minutes. She was looking at the houses either side of her, wondering where she should stay.

All the houses were empty. Her people were free to stay where they pleased, the streets were theirs.

Raksha stopped before a large house, the path she had been following branching off either side of the building. It was a large home, with many windows, behind which were thick and lush purple curtains.

Raksha considered the edifice for a moment, before hearing swift movement behind her, turning in time to see her General rushing up to her.

But she did not have time to save herself, and realised she had been killed, when she experienced what felt like a hard blow in her naval. But she knew what it really was, and the sound of the blade being sharply withdrawn from her flesh, was a sound she would never forget.

Raksha stumbled back, her knees weakening she collapsed, falling back against the grey stone wall behind her.

She touched her seeping wound, drawing back bloodied fingers.

Raksha leant back against the wall, body hunched over and grimacing in pain.

‘How could you....?’ She hissed to the General. ‘...Why...?’

But the General said nothing. He merely stood over her, holding the knife in a hand. Nothing of his expression was readable.

Raksha stared back at him. But she was not afraid, only angry, burning with rage at the betrayal that cut so deep.

‘My own man...’ she breathed. ‘My own man....’

The General turned his back on her, turning he strode away without another word, leaving Raksha there to bleed out and die.

Raksha could not call for help. She was deep within the city, and she knew that no one would hear her, and even if she did try to call for help, her General would probably only come back to finish her off, not that she would even last that long.

And so she simply sighed, allowing her body to relax as she leant back. She made her last efforts to experience the last of the world around her. Everything she saw, everything she heard, everything she smelled and could touch.

Raksha tilted her head, holding with one hand the wound in her side that was seeping blood between her fingers.

‘You’re looking a little worse for wear.’

Raksha raised her head. She did not recognise the voice, but she recognised the figure. She didn’t know who this person was, but she had seen his kind before.

‘Do you want to live?’ Reuben asked her, leaning closer and staring at her through the large windows in his plague mask. ‘We have a way that would allow you to live. You wouldn’t be the same as you were before’ he added, ‘...but you would be alive.’

Raksha blinked slowly at him.

‘You said didn’t you?’ Reuben prompted, ‘you said that if you were to be given a second chance at life then you would take it? Well now is your chance.’

Raksha reached a hand towards him, the hand that was covered in blood.

Reuben took it, grasping it firmly in his own.

‘I will take you back’ he whispered to her. ‘I will take you to my home.’

He bent down then, lifting her in his arms.

He turned to look into her face, smiling behind his mask.

‘I will show you our home.’ He smiled wider then. ‘It is now your home too. You will become one of us’ he said marching forwards, and through the portal he had summoned before him. ‘There will be no going back.’

Interlude end

‘There are many rooms within this palace’ Miranda said to Valery, rising from her seat and drifting away. ‘For the moment, I want you to stay in the room opposite mine.’

‘Why?’

‘For safety.’

‘But what about Cam?’ Valery asked the queen uncertainly. ‘Shouldn’t I....shouldn’t I be staying with him?’

‘Not until after you are married.’

‘And when will that be?’

Miranda paused, standing facing the wall with her back to the young princess. ‘It is supposed to be within the fortnight of your arrival’ she spoke slowly. ‘But...’ she trailed off. ‘If Cam is still unwell...I’m sure the council will fabricate an appropriate excuse to postpone the wedding. He can’t be seen in the state he is right now.’

‘Who...?’ Valery began uncertainly. ‘Who did this to him?’

‘I don’t know’ Miranda answered. ‘It must be one of the council members, but...’ she shook her head. Valery thought she would say something else, but she didn’t.

Miranda glanced over her shoulder, back at the young princess.

‘Come with me.’

Miranda led Valery away through the palace, up the many stairs and to a room directly opposite her own.

‘This will suffice’ Miranda said, studying the room around her. ‘It’s large...’ she glanced back at Valery. ‘What do you think?’

‘It’s nice I suppose.’

It was an empty room, but bright, with a high ceiling and a glass chandelier hanging in the centre.

‘We can bring two large beds in here’ Miranda was saying, ‘cupboards and whatever else you might need. I’ll see it done by tonight. The servants will see to everything you need. And you...’ she said to Plum.

Plum glanced up uncertainly.

Miranda just smiled at the handmaiden, sighing as she did. She approached them both, placing a hand on each of their shoulders.

‘This is a dangerous place’ she said, ‘and these are dangerous times. I am no friend of the council, and I do whatever I can...what little I can to oppose them.’ She looked from the princess, to the handmaiden, and back again. ‘I want us to be friends’ she said to them. ‘I want you to know...that I will always be kind to you, to both of you. We are all in a dangerous place. And we need to stick together.’

Valery gazed up at the queen, eyes shimmering.

‘I will always be kind to you’ Miranda repeated. ‘We are all equal here’ she turned to Plum. ‘Even you’ she said to her. Miranda glanced back to the princess. ‘I will do whatever I can to protect you’ she said. ‘Always.’

Miranda reached forwards, embracing both of them at once.

‘Whatever you need’ she said, ‘just come to me. I will see what I can do.’

Bordon sat at the table in the inn. It was midday, and he was already heavily drunk.

These last few days he had spent at the bottom of a bottle. It had been the only way he had come to deal with his losses, and how cruel his life had become.

‘Why don’t you put that away?’ his friend Methers suggested, sitting on the other side of the table. ‘If you continue to drink as heavily as you do, you’ll kill yourself.’

‘Perhaps that’s what I want’ Bordon mumbled, utterly miserable. ‘Perhaps...perhaps....’

He bowed his head.

‘I’ve lost my family’ he whispered. ‘They were *murdered*...my wife...*oh gods*...’ he sobbed, burying his face in his hands. ‘*How could this happen?*’

Methers turned away, feeling uncomfortable at the sight of his friend’s tears.

‘Things are different now’ Methers said glancing back. ‘I’ve been around for long enough to know the suffering. When the old king was alive....’

He trailed off.

‘The council control everything now. Even a fool could see it.’

‘Why?’ Bordon whispered, raising his head as the tears continued to fall, ‘why does the new king do nothing?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He is nothing like his father was. His father was strong...kind.....he cared for the people.....we lived good lives.’

‘Times change’ Methers said. ‘Times always change.’

‘Change is only good if it makes things better’ Bordon said. ‘Now?’ he paused. ‘We have never been worse off.’

Methers looked away.

‘Why is it’ Bordon began, ‘that in all this time, we have never seen the king?’

Methers looked back at him, giving him a level expression.

‘In all these years...since Cam...was a young boy prince....not in all that time...has anyone in the city ever laid eyes on him. I wonder’ he went on, ‘is he even *real*?’ Bordon finished.

He gritted his teeth, balling his fists and glaring at the table, before continuing.

‘Do we even *have* a king?’ Bordon asked. ‘The council...’ he hissed, ‘rule *everything*.’

‘Such blasphemy’ spoke a man sitting at the bar, turning to face them. ‘You speak dangerous words.’

The two men sitting at the table glanced around.

‘Since when was it blasphemy to speak against the council?’ Bordon grumbled back, recognising the crest upon the man’s robe as one that which the holy men wore.

‘The council are the mouthpiece of the gods’ the robed figure answered. ‘We speak to the gods through them.’

‘The gods?’ Bordon glared dangerously at the holy man. ‘We need no mouthpiece’ Bordon spoke quietly. ‘Honest and true men could speak to the gods directly themselves. The gods would listen to those that are pure.’

‘Blasphemy!’ the holy man cried.

‘No!’ Borden hollered back, slamming his hands down upon the table and knocking over his bottle as he rose swiftly to his feet. ‘The real blasphemy spoken here are the words uttered by those who would twist and warp this world, and deform true meaning to their own gain! The gods listen to every one of us. Those that insist we need to speak through *them*, the holy *leaders* and the council are nothing but traitors and liars who care only for their own gain, their hands are red with the same blood of the people they claim to want to save. The vagrants and gypsies and bastards and whores and even the innocent! Many good souls have been ripped from this world by men who seek only to elevate themselves...souls like...’ Borden spoke quietly now, ‘...my own family...’

‘If your family died then they deserved it’ the holy man replied coldly. ‘The holy men serve the people fairly and are just, taking only those that would harm *good* folk with their lies.’

‘They are nothing but secret police’ Borden snarled. ‘Murders! Murders! My wife and children were *innocent*!’

He charged for the holy man, grabbing a stool as he went and attacking. Metherr rose swiftly to try to stop his friend as Borden broke the stool, smashing it over the holy man and sending him falling to the floor.

‘Filthy cur!’ the holy man growled, before Borden grabbed the man roughly by the shoulders, hauling him to his feet and punching him hard in the face, again and again.

Metherr lunged for Borden, grabbing him from behind and holding him beneath the arms to subdue him, dragging him back as chaos erupted in the room as the barman and other guests shouted and cried out in fury at the treatment of the holy man. The people began to fight amongst themselves, some in support of one man, some in support of the other as everything descended into chaos.

Borden was hardly aware of what was going on around him. Metherr released him as someone attacked him from behind, and Borden made for the holy figure again as bodies moved all around them. People tore at each other, screaming in rage and shouting obscenities at one another.

Borden tried to attack the holy man, clawing at him as he tried desperately to reach him. The holy man only smirked, stepping back and sneering as other men, religious fanatics, held Borden back. These men did not appear to know the holy man. But part of the strength of the new and corrupt religion, was the strength in unity, by the men that thought of one mind.

Borden was attacked and beaten and thrown to the floor, approached by the holy man once he was on his back and defenceless.

‘*THE COUNCIL SHOULD DIE!*’ Borden screamed at the top of his lungs, grasping onto the holy man’s foot as he held him down. Even defeated and broken he looked terrifying, snarling and howling through bloodied teeth. ‘*THE COUNCIL SHOULD DIE! THE HOLY MEN SHOULD DIE! THEY ARE CORRUPT! EVIL! EVIL!*’

‘You will die for spreading such foul lies’ the holy man sneered, stepping off his throat and backing away. ‘Stand him up’ he ordered the men, ‘take him outside.’

They obeyed him like loyal shepard dogs, doing so without pause or question.

Borden was dragged outside into the street by the mob that surrounded him.

All around, other people who had risen to fight against the religious fanatics were being killed, strangled and beaten and stabbed. Borden then heard a strangled scream of a man in

agonising pain. He glanced around wide-eyed to see his childhood friend burning alive further down in the street, Mether's clothes quickly catching fire as the flames licked and scorched his body.

Bordon tore his eyes away as one of the men smashed an oil lamp against one of the walls, pouring the liquid over his body.

The holy man stood before him, holding a flame in his hand as the crowd surrounding Bordon, backed away from him suddenly, holding the circle around him.

'Any last words you filthy heretic?' the holy man asked him.

Bordon snarled at him, through his injuries he showed no pain.

'See you in hell' Bordon spoke loudly and clearly, before the match was thrown at him, and he went up in flames.

Luke returned to Cam an hour or so after leaving him, carrying a tray of food and some water. Cam turned towards the door as Luke entered. He still lay in bed, having not moved since Luke last left him.

'How are you feeling?' Luke asked him, placing the tray down on the table nearby.

Cam stared at him, blinking slowly, before turning away.

'My body...hurts...'

'I know.'

Cam pulled back the sheets, sitting up gingerly. Luke tensed as he watched Cam grimace in pain, pausing as he waited for the pain to subside before moving towards the edge of the bed.

Cam gripped the edge tightly, before slowly rising to his feet.

He wobbled slightly, and stepped forward.

Cam made his way across the room, moving very slowly and gingerly, heading towards a small mirror set on the wall at head height.

Cam approached and examined himself, staring at his own face in the mirror, and slowly turning his head from side to side, as he looked at his own wounds through his one good eye.

'I've spoken to a physician' Luke told him, as Cam lifted his lip, staring at his broken teeth.

'He said he will be able to fix that, so that it will look like normal again, like it never happened.'

'I want that' Cam breathed, lowering his hand. 'I want that...'

He bowed his head, shuddering suddenly, before looking up and straightening again.

'Are you hungry?' Luke asked him.

'Did you bring me something to read?'

Luke hesitated.

'No' he replied.

'I want to read' Cam mumbled, speaking to the wall. 'I miss my books.'

Luke smiled then.

'I will remember the next time I visit' he said.

Luke moved over to him.

'I'm sorry' he said to Cam. 'I'm sorry this happened to you.'

Cam did not speak.

‘I...’ Luke began, ‘I’m glad that we...can talk. I’m just.....sorry that it had to happen this way.’

Cam looked to his brother at last.

‘I...’ Luke began. He sighed then, stepping forwards and embracing Cam, but doing so very gently, so as not to hurt Cam’s tender body.

‘I’m sorry’ Luke whispered in his ear. ‘I’m sorry things are the way they are...I truly am...’

Interlude start

Reuben walked forwards through the portal, carrying Raksha’s limp body in his arms. She was bleeding out. The wound in her naval was already seeping blood into Reuben’s black robes.

There was a flash of light, Raksha experienced a strange sensation she could not have describe, and then suddenly the light around her was different.

She instinctively knew some magic had taken the both of them somewhere different.

‘We are here now’ Reuben said to her. ‘Just stay still. Hang in there. You will be better soon.’

Reuben carried her onwards, ascending a set of steps.

Everything suddenly became darker, as Raksha realised they were inside. Her eyes fluttered closed.

Reuben placed her upon a bed.

‘Is she alright?’ Isami asked rushing up to them.

Around Isami the other figures loomed. There were eight in total including Raksha. They were all gathered together now.

Reuben, the only one wearing a mask now straightened, taking the mask from his face.

‘Are you alright?’ his brother Lucas asked him.

Reuben turned to glance at him, giving him a nod, before turning back to Raksha on the bed.

Isami leant over her, hand going to the necromancer’s throat and feeling for a pulse.

‘She’s dead’ Isami said, before straightening and facing the other way, where there was another figure lying on another bed nearby.

The seven figures moved away from Raksha’s original body, and towards this new one. The seven figures surrounded the bed.

The figure on the bed was a beautiful one, tall and slender and perfectly shapely. The body Raksha had been born in was indeed beautiful, and despite her leadership position where she led an army of men, she had dressed seductively, boldly, in clothes that revealed most of her gorgeous body, with no armour whatsoever. This body on the table, though naked underneath, was dressed in the same simple black robes the others would wear so often. Her hair was long and black and wavy, not a single strand out of place. Her face was utterly perfect, the skin smooth like porcelain. From her back, curled upwards and out the way were a pair of wings. They were skeletal, and made of metal that was shaped to look like bone, shrouded in purple miasma always, with the ends formed into sharp knives.

There was utter silence in the room. No one spoke. No one moved.

And then, the figure on the table opened her eyes.

‘She’s alive’ Tiara beamed. ‘It worked!’

‘Where am I?’ the figure spoke. ‘What happened?’

‘Why don’t you try sitting up?’ Castello suggested.

Raksha grasped the edge of the bed and sat up, the seven figures surrounding her suddenly backed away, making way for her wings as she curled them around her body.

‘What’s this?’ Raksha said, gazing with black eyes at the wings, *her* wings.

‘We thought you’d like them’ Tiara said to her. ‘We gave them to you.’

‘What are you saying?’ Raksha breathed. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘We’re saying...’ Reuben began.

‘You’re designed’ Isami finished. ‘*We* designed you.’

‘What?’

‘Open your robe’ Isami said.

Raksha looked down at herself and the black robe she was wearing. She raised her hands, grasping the edges of the robe and pulling it open.

She gasped in shock.

What she saw, was not the naked body she expected, but something else.

‘What is this....?’ She gasped. ‘What have you done to me...?!’

She could see inside her own chest cavity through bronze ribs. She could see cogs and wheels turning, a clockwork heart beating inside the otherwise empty space in her ribcage.

‘What have you done to me?!’

‘We have let you live’ one of the others spoke, as another approached her with a metal plate, placing it over the gap on her body, making her chest look whole again, like normal, like a living persons.

‘We left this off’ the person said stepping back, ‘so that you could see.’

‘You are the replacement for one that was once known simply as Auntie’ Lucas said to her.

‘It has taken us many years to find one worthy of her role. It has taken us many years to find *you*.’

Raksha hugged herself.

‘I feel sick.’

‘No’ Lucas said, ‘you *think* you feel sick. You are not in an organic body anymore.’

‘I still feel sick’ Raksha repeated.

‘Yes...well...’ Lucas said casually, turning away. ‘It takes some getting used to.’

‘Why do I have wings?’ Raksha asked.

‘We thought you’d like them’ Isami told her. ‘They are rather bold aren’t they?’ she said, as Raksha rose from the bed. ‘They are perhaps a little too much.’

Raksha moved across the room, and to the dead body lying upon the other bed, to *her* body.

‘We could get rid of them’ Isami continued. ‘The wings I mean. We could dismantle them if you don’t like them. You *are designed* after all. You could look like whatever you want.’

‘No’ Raksha said, gazing at her own dead body. ‘No....leave them....’

She stared down at herself, at the wound in her naval that had killed her.

‘My own man...’ she whispered. ‘My own man betrayed me...’

She turned then to a tall mirror placed on the wall beside her, staring at her own reflection.

‘I look different.’

‘You look more beautiful’ one of the figures said behind her.

‘Change me back.’

‘What?’

Raksha turned to Castello. ‘Just my face’ she said. ‘I want to look like I did before.’

‘But...you're prettier this way...more beautiful....’

‘I was beautiful before’ Raksha answered. ‘Change me back. I want to look like I did before.’

‘You want to be recognised’ Lucas realised. ‘You want...revenge on the man who killed you.’

Raksha folded her wings neatly behind her. Controlling them to her was easy, and she did it instinctively without thought.

‘Change my face’ she said. ‘Nothing else.’ She paused. ‘Can you do that?’

‘Yes’ Lucas said. ‘We can.’

‘But don’t you want to wait for a moment?’ Isami asked her. ‘I’m sure you have many questions.’

Raksha hesitated.

‘Come on’ Reuben encouraged. ‘The man you seek...he’s not going anywhere. And besides...the best type of revenge is savoured.’

Raksha smiled then. ‘Fine’ she said. ‘Then let us talk.’

The other figures went quietly away to dispose of Raksha’s old body, and Raksha in her new form, went outside with Reuben to explore what was now her new home.

They walked far, and for a long time, Reuben following always a step behind her.

‘So?’ he asked. ‘What do you think?’

‘This place’ Raksha began, gazing all around her, ‘feels.....unnatural...’

‘Of course it is’ Reuben answered. ‘It was designed.’

‘A world that was designed?’

‘Yes. This entire world was designed, not formed naturally. Or at least.....that’s what we’ve been led to believe. There is a library back at home, where diaries are kept. We believe they are the old diaries of men and women who used to live here, previous members of the eight. Some die sometimes, they get replaced...the diaries are old...very old. This world...’ Reuben took in the environment around them, ‘as far as we understand, is older than any world, older than all the worlds put together, older than anyone can comprehend...billions and billions of years and more. Our home’ Reuben said also, ‘that building...is apparently that old too.’

‘The building you call home’ Raksha said absently. ‘This palace...this world.....is not homely.’ She glanced to the handsome man beside her. ‘What do you call this world?’

‘This world?’ Reuben tilted his head at her. ‘If you go by what the old diaries say, this world is called Lacklustre Paradise.’

‘Lacklustre’ Raksha mumbled, ‘...Paradise.’ She smiled humorously. ‘How droll.’

‘Many of us adopt new names when we come here’ Reuben said to her. ‘You have a new life; you can become anyone you want.’

‘Can I still use magic?’ Raksha asked. ‘Am I still a necromancer?’

‘No’ Reuben shook his head. ‘Magic does not form naturally in our bodies as it did in life. We get our magic from this world. The longer we stay in this world...the more our bodies

absorb magic...it's as if...it comes from the soil...the trees...the sea.....the very air itself...'

'I've lost my magic?'

'It will come back to you' Reuben reassured her, 'in time.' He turned away. 'Come on' he said. 'Let's give you your old face back.'

As they walked back through the outside world, heading to the building that was their home, Reuben asked her one last question.

'What would you like your new name to be?'

'Lucretia' Raksha answered without pause. 'It was my mother's name...before she was murdered.'

Interlude end

After staying with him for some time, Luke went away, leaving Cam alone again. Sometime later he came back carrying a stack of books, and was accompanied by an unfamiliar figure, a man.

'This is the physician I was telling you about' Luke explained to Cam, placing the stack of books on the nearby desk before turning to him. 'He's going to take a look at you.'

'Dear me' the physician said, observing Cam from a short distance away as he sat on the bed with his back to the window behind him, staring back at him wide eyed and tense.

'I don't want any questions' Luke told the man shortly. 'Please just...do your job.'

'Of course' the physician bowed. 'I only work to serve others and ease their discomforts.'

'And remember you've seen nothing here' Luke pressed.

'I've seen nothing' the physician repeated submissively. 'Nothing at all.'

The physician spoke to Cam.

'Now I understand you want me to fix some teeth is that right?' he took a step forwards, raising his arm and reaching a hand towards Cam. 'Let me look at you.'

Cam's eyes widened further, and he drew a slow and deep breath, staring at the physician's hand in fear as he drew closer.

'*STAY AWAY!*'

Cam slapped the man's hand away, drawing back on the bed away from him, as close to the wall behind him as he could.

'DON'T TOUCH ME!'

The physician stared in shock, frozen to the spot. Behind him Luke had tensed too, he spoke.

'Cam....what...?'

'Don't touch me....' Cam spoke in a whisper now. 'Stay away from me.'

As he spoke, Cam's whole body began to tremble, and tears brimmed in his eyes, running down his cheek.

'Don't touch me.....'

Luke stared in shock at his brother, before turning to speak with the physician.

'Come with me.'

The two marched back out of the room, leaving Cam alone to calm himself.

'I'm sorry' Luke said to the physician the moment the two were alone, speaking in the corridor outside the room. 'I don't know why he did that...that's never happened before.'

'It seems to me he's suffering some sort of trauma' the physician said. 'Most likely due to his accident?' he frowned. 'Did he act this way before he sustained his injuries?'

'No' Luke replied. 'I mean...he's timid and withdrawn at times but...he's never lashed out like that....or panicked....' Luke bit his lip hard in worry. '....he's never acted that way before...' he repeated in a mumbled, speaking as if to himself.

The physician nodded in understanding.

'Perhaps' he began speaking slowly, 'if a woman were to look at him instead, he would behave differently. I have an apprentice. She...is not as skilled as I am but...in this case...'

Luke nodded. 'Bring her.'

The physician bowed low. He turned on his heel and walked briskly away.

Once the man was gone, Luke entered the room again to find Cam curled up on the bed and crying.

Luke approached him slowly, reaching out tentatively to touch his shoulder.

'They want to hurt me...' Cam was whispering. 'They want to.....*oh gods*...'

'No one is going to hurt you Cam' Luke told him firmly. 'Not when I'm here.'

Cam turned his head to look up at Luke properly.

'I'll look after you. If you don't want the physician here, then that's fine, but you need to have someone look at your teeth.'

Cam looked away without speaking.

'I'm going now' Luke said gently to him. 'I'm going to speak to mother.' He made to turn away, hesitating suddenly. 'You probably don't know' Luke began, 'but...a bride has been found for you. A young princess. She's...here now, in the palace.' Luke paused then. 'She seems nice' he added. 'I think you'll like her.'

Cam didn't speak.

'I'm going to leave you alone for a while' Luke said to him. 'Stay here and rest, read your books. I'll be back later.'

Cam stayed where he was, lying on his side on the bed. Luke exited the room, striding down the corridor and away. Standing on the other end of the corridor, unseen by Luke, was Brioke, watching the doorway silently.

But he could do nothing. The room was guarded on the queen's orders by two burley men, her own soldiers.

No one other than Luke and the queen herself could enter the room uninvited.

Brioke turned and drifted back in the other direction.

'Now come on' Miranda frowned sternly. 'You can do better than that.'

'I'm trying my best' Valery huffed. 'Why are we doing this anyway?'

'What do you mean?' Miranda replied. 'Aren't you having fun?'

'It's not that' Valery said. 'It's just...strange.'

The handmaiden waiting at the edge of the room grinned happily at the spectacle before her.

The door suddenly opened then and Luke walked into the room, he hesitated, seeing his mother and Valery.

‘What are you doing?’ Luke asked shortly.

Miranda smiled shyly at him, playing with the small bat in her hands, twirling it between her fingers.

‘We were just playing a little game’ Miranda said sweetly, patting the ping pong table between herself and Valery to indicate.

Luke scowled at her, closing the door with a snap behind him.

‘This really isn’t the time’ he told his mother.

‘What do you mean?’

‘This is a serious’ Luke snapped at her.

‘What?’ Miranda shrugged. ‘We were only having a game.’

‘We need to talk about Cam.’

‘He’s safe isn’t he?’

Luke turned away from her, quickly growing tired of her. He addressed Valery instead.

‘Princess. How are you finding it here? Are you comfortable?’

‘Do you want an honest answer?’ Valery replied.

Luke hesitated.

‘Miranda has been very kind to me’ Valery said. ‘But...I don’t know what I’ve come to. What dangers this place...’ she fell silent.

Luke watched her.

‘You’ve met Cam?’ he asked.

‘I...have...’ Valery spoke slowly, reluctantly.

‘I see’ Luke replied. ‘It must have been quite a shock for you.’

‘Am I safe here?’ she asked him.

‘I don’t know.’

Valery bowed her head.

‘Cam is awake now’ Luke continued. ‘I think...its best if you were to meet him soon.’

Valery glanced up at him.

‘Is it right?’ she asked Luke. ‘Should he not recover first?’

‘Perhaps’ Luke grumbled. ‘But...’ he trailed off, walking away from them and towards the corner of the room as he thought. ‘I don’t know how much you know of what’s been going on here. But Cam at this time...he’s weak. I think...the sooner he gets to know you...the sooner he marries and has children...’ Luke went silent in thought. ‘Marriage would strengthen the king’s position; having children...having a son and heir would strengthen this family even more. At the moment, the council have far too much power over the people. Since my father died...many years ago, when we were still children....they collectively became caretakers of the throne, until my brother came of age.’ Luke folded his arms as he continued to speak. ‘But by that time, they had their sunken claws so far into him, that he would do anything they asked of him. He is....a shadow king....a vassal. He’s afraid, I know. He pushes me away. He’s only speaking to me now because of what’s happened. I think he wants to keep me at a distance for my own protection, and it’s true that the council completely ignore me nowadays. I am only the second son after all, the other twin, born minutes after my brother.’ Luke turned around to face them again, staring at Valery. ‘I do not fully know the extent of

Cam's suffering. But I know that the council treat him cruelly. I know that he lives in fear. I see it in his eyes; I hear whispers, but nothing more.'

Valery stared back at Luke hard.

'Will you promise me' Luke said. 'Promise me that you will be kind to him. Love him, if you can, and...do your duty...as a wife.'

'I will' Valery spoke clearly. 'I will.'

'Together' Luke said, 'you can fix the damage done to this kingdom and make it great again, as it was in the days my father was alive.'

Cam delved into his books now, reading the most wonderful stories. This palace held many thousands of books, and in all the time Cam had lived here, he hadn't even gotten close to reading half of them.

Now he read a story of a man who woke in an underground place, a dungeon of some sort, with a bump on his head and no memory of how he got there. The place the nameless man had found himself in was a vast hall of some sorts, with a throne, many columns, and no way out it seemed. The only way the nameless man was able to escape, was by jumping off the edge of one of the platforms, and into a river below, where the water burned his skin. He managed to climb out, and from there, he began his search of the strange place he had found himself in, and began the quest to regain his lost memory, and to learn who he truly was.

Cam was just reading the part where the nameless man met another character, the first he had encountered in the dark dungeons, a beautiful green-skinned earth elemental. The pair were just making their introductions when there came a knock, and the door to his room opened.

Cam glanced up to see his brother enter.

'Hey' Luke said to him. 'Are you feeling better?'

Cam shut the book on his lap, putting it aside. He was about to reply to Luke, when another figure entered the room.

Cam instantly tensed.

'Cam' Luke began, closing the door after them. 'This is the physician's apprentice' he explained. 'She's going to be looking at your teeth.'

'Hello' the young lady bowed, a woman of about seventeen, pretty with long blonde hair plaited in pigtails. 'My name is Suzie. It's nice to meet you.'

Cam clenched his teeth, glaring at her in suspicion. When he didn't reply, Suzie continued to speak.

'You must be Cameron' she beamed. 'Is that right?'

Cam bowed his head slightly, looking away from her.

'People...normally just call me Cam' he mumbled, speaking slowly.

'That's wonderful!' Suzie beamed. 'I prefer Cam anyway. May I call you Cam?'

Cam glanced back at her. She kept her distance from him, still standing by the door beside Luke.

'I'm going to approach' Suzie said to Cam. 'May I approach?'

Cam's heartbeat quickened slightly and he glanced uncertainly at his brother, who gave him an encouraging smile.

Cam glanced back at the physician's apprentice, who waited patiently for permission.

'Its fine' Cam replied at last.

Suzie smiled again.

She took a step forward, moving slowly towards Cam.

She stopped a few feet from his bed.

'I'm just going to look at your teeth' she explained. 'I'm going to have to touch you. Is that ok?'

Cam stared back at her. His palms began to sweat. His breathing increased slightly.

'I cannot touch you' Suzie spoke politely, 'until you give me permission.'

'Fine' Cam mumbled. 'D-do...do what you want.'

'Alright' she whispered.

Behind them, Luke watched from beside the door.

Suzie reached for Cam, who flinched involuntarily, drawing a sharp intake of breath.

'It's alright' Suzie spoke softly. 'I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to look.'

Cam allowed her to touch him. Her hand caressed his cheek gently, and she used a thumb to lift his upper lip back.

She frowned as she stared into his mouth.

'Hmmm.'

'Is everything alright?' Luke spoke up.

After a few seconds, Suzie let go of Cam, drawing her hands back and straightening up, she turned towards Luke.

'Yes' she said. 'But I'm afraid it's going take some work.'

'Can you do it?' Luke asked.

'Yes.' She glanced back to Cam. 'I'm just going to get my things' she told him. 'I'll be back in a little while.'

She bowed to Luke before she left. When they were alone together, Luke spoke to Cam.

'She's nice isn't she?'

Cam didn't answer, only stared at the bed beneath him, wide eyed and frozen, as if he hadn't heard Luke speak. He seemed to be in a trance.

Luke heaved a deep sigh, turning he left the room, closing the door after him.

Suzie returned shortly after, bringing with her all that she would need.

She opened up her bag and placed her tools upon the table. She turned to Cam, who still sat upon the bed, Luke waited nervously beside her.

'I'm going to fix your teeth' she said to him. 'But I need you asleep for that. I'm going to give you a drug to keep you under. You'll be out for a while.'

Cam who had been watching her as she spoke looked down then, staring at his lap. He hated being the centre of attention, at all times, but especially now.

'Is it...' Cam began. He took a deep breath before speaking again. 'Is it going to hurt?'

'No' Suzie told him. 'It will be a bit sore afterwards. But you won't feel a thing I assure you.

These drugs are strong.'

'It's alright Cam' Luke said. 'I'll be here.'

Suzie smiled at him, indicating the operating table beside her.

'If you would like to lie down' she said. 'Everything will be alright.'

Cam reluctantly rose from the bed, drifting over to the table. He lay down as he was asked, staring up at the ceiling nervously.

He didn't remember much after that, but when he came around again, several hours had passed, and he saw that the day had grown a little darker outside.

Cam was groggy. It took him several minutes to become fully aware. But when Suzie lifted the mirror, he saw as he pulled back his lip, that his teeth looked whole again.

'They're ceramic' Suzie beamed, 'as good as the real thing, if not better.'

As Cam stared at himself, he found that he liked what he saw. Not only his new teeth. His bruises were going down, only a little, but Cam could feel himself beginning to heal.

'I like them' he spoke quietly at last, doing so with a smile. 'I like them...'

Cam was left alone after that to sleep, still a little weary from the effects of the drugs that had put him under. He slept heavily, dreaming of all the wonderful things he read about in his books.

Luke lingered in the doorway with his hand on the doorknob, watching Cam for a moment, before closing the door, and leaving him in peace.

Interlude start

Raksha had always been a happy child. She was an only child, never knowing her father, she and her mother had grown up with only each other as company. It was a happy life. From time to time Raksha would ask her mother who her father was, and if he was alive, seeing the fathers of other children in the pretty town she grew up in. But her mother would never answer, would always avoid the question or change the subject. Raksha would often think about the man she didn't know, and wonder about him. Was he perhaps someone of importance? When she was younger, Raksha would think that perhaps her father was a mighty soldier, like the ones in the tales her mother told her at bedtime, or an adventurer. Perhaps he was a sailor, who explored the open seas and travelled to distant lands unknown.

And then Raksha began to grow and mature, and her thoughts towards her father changed, and became far more down to earth.

Perhaps her parents love had been only a brief fling, perhaps one had broken the others heart or were forbidden by someone, either society or one of their own parents from being together, for whatever reason.

But the most likely scenario that Raksha came to in the end, was that her father was dead, or had raped her mother before vanishing.

And as Raksha began to grow even more, she found she didn't even care, and she thought no longer of her father.

And then she found love. First time love was a wonderful and scary feeling, as Raksha experienced strong emotions stirring inside her she had never experience before. She was a sincere and serious character, but around *him*, she became giddy, childish even, and she found herself behaving like the young doey-eyed couples she had so often seen growing up.

But it was not meant to be. The man she had fallen in love with was involved in dangerous business, with dangerous people, and they targeted *her*.

Raksha did not know what was going on. One moment life was good and she was happy, the next moment her husband to be was dead, murdered. She was raped by many, by the same people who had killed her lover, their hands still stained with his blood. She had been forced to watch her mother die, after the men had had their way with her too. They only spared Raksha because she was a 'tasty treat', young and pretty. She was taken away from home, and introduced to a new life. For years she travelled from place to place, being abused and used and given to other to use by the man who 'owned' her, like one would own a dog or horse. And it was in this new life, she had experienced necromancy for the first time.

When life became so horrible that death became preferable, she murdered her master, vowing that no man would ever touch her again, ever, ever again, not even if she came to truly love him. The experience had been so horrible.

She had expected repercussions, expected to be punished for her actions, to be killed. But as she stood over the bleeding man in the tent, dagger still in hand, there was a strange silence that pressed around her.

She was not only saved a painful death for her actions, but rewarded, worshiped even by the men she once thought to be as bad as her master. On that cold wintry day, through the falling snow she gazed at the faces of the poor soldiers around her, as they threw themselves to her feet, praising her, like one would a god.

Shortly after that, the necromancer appeared.

He must have seen something in her that she did not see herself, for he took her on as his apprentice.

Years later, Raksha would return to the camp, long since abandoned and untouched since the day she had murdered her old master. She would use her magic. Her first act of necromancy was performed on the body of the man that had tortured her for all those years, the body that had since rotted to bone and raw flesh, though due to the severe cold, was mostly still intact.

And Raksha was happy.

She kept her old master by her side for years, learning from her new and kind master who taught her many things.

Her apprenticeship only ended with his death, as he succumbed to a fever in the cold of winter one year. From then on, Raksha made her way alone, abandoning even the body of her old master, burning him in a fire she conjured from her own magic. She went on to forge her own path, years later, becoming the leader of one of the most feared cults in history, wielding power over men, both the living and the dead, she conquered cities and stuck fear into the hearts of anyone who heard her name. For years she lived this life, until one day she was betrayed, and murdered by her own General, a man who remembered the old days, when the lives of so many people were not ruled by a dictator, were not ruled by fear.

Raksha had come to own everything in her world. But her reign was cut short.

But her story did not end with her death. Raksha found her once loyal General drinking happily in an inn, she slaughtered every man within the room, be they his friends, or simply folk unfortunate enough to be there on that time and day. She killed everyone, like sheep cornered in a shed, all of them dead, except for him.

‘It cannot be’ the General whispered in horror, recognising the face of the one he had once served. ‘How can you perform necromancy on yourself? You were dead!’

‘Death is not as simple as you think’ she answered shortly. ‘I have new friends now, a new home...and a new name.’

Her expression darkened, and she curled her wings around her as she levitated in the air, her back shrouded in purple mist, the ends of her skeletal wings sharp like knives. Blood from the other people who had been laughing and talking and drinking happily only minutes ago was splashed on the walls and pooled on the floor. Body parts, organs, eyes, teeth and brain were smeared everywhere. The gore was repulsive; the stench alone would make one retch.

I will make you pay for what you’ve done’ Raksha whispered.

She took him outside after that, and killed him in the most gruesome and agonising way, making his death last minutes as he screamed and begged for his life, crying that he was sorry.

But Raksha was deaf to his pleas.

She twisted his foot until it broke, grasping both his legs with the sharp of her wings, cutting so far into his flesh it touched the bone and pulling until one leg came off, before using his own weight and gravity to smash his head into a bloody pulp. Using her magic to revive him again, before finishing him off with a heavy carriage, one pinning him to the ground as it sat on his arm crushing it, the other carriage, guided by her magic, slowly rolling down the hill towards his head.

‘*RAKSHA!*’ the General screamed. ‘*RAKSHAAAA PLEEEAAAASSSSE!*’

‘My name’ Raksha spoke calmly, though he couldn’t hear her over his own screams, ‘is Lucretia.’

She threw her hand up and the carriage jerked sharply towards him, crashing into the other carriage that rested on the unfortunate mans arm and crushing his head which exploded under the pressure. Blood, gore and brain matter shot far down the street, amongst shards of bone and the slushy goo of eyes and tongue.

Lucretia let out a deep sigh, allowing herself to lower in the air and touch the ground. She had elevated herself, floating on the air in a high position to watch over the whole thing. Now, after minutes of agonized screams, the place was eerily quiet.

‘Do you feel better now?’ a plague masked figure asked behind her. ‘*Lucretia.*’

Lucretia turned to the figure.

‘Castello’ she said. ‘I recognise your voice.’

Behind his mask, Castello smiled.

‘I think...’ he spoke carefully, ‘that you will fit in very well with our little family’ he said. ‘Very well indeed.’

Lucretia glanced back at the bloody mess she had made, before facing Castello again.

‘Show me more’ she said to him. ‘Show me what there is to see.’

‘There is so much to see’ he said rising from the wall and straightening. ‘There are so many worlds out there, so many possibilities.....so much *fun.*’ He smiled behind his mask. ‘Just come with me and I will show you.’

Lucretia walked with him, and the two moved away, striding through the portal he had created and to another world. Lucretia as she went used her magic to conceal her wings, so

that she could blend in easily with a crowd, placing onto her face the plague mask and black gloves as she went.

The two slipped away together, to places unknown.

Interlude end

‘You mean today?’ Cam asked tentatively. ‘You want me to meet her today?’

‘As soon as possible’ Luke replied. ‘Yes today’ he added, when Cam gave him an uncertain stare.

It was the day after Cam had been given his new teeth, and he was still recovering from the injuries that put him in that room in the first place.

‘B-but...’ Cam stammered, ‘but...isn’t it too soon?’

‘You know how things are’ Luke replied sternly. ‘Must I explain it to you again?’

‘You must’ Cam answered flatly.

Luke let out a sigh, crossing his arms and leaning back in his seat.

‘In short, the sooner you marry and have children, the sooner you will bring stability to the kingdom and...’

‘And?’ Cam repeated.

‘And...’ Luke finished. ‘The damage done to the kingdom can be repaired. The damage you’ve allowed to happen.’

Cam turned away.

‘When will she be coming here?’ he asked reluctantly.

‘Soon’ Luke told him. ‘Mother said she will bring her about eleven o’clock...which is in a few minutes.’

‘Only a few minutes?’

Luke cocked his head at him.

‘Are you nervous?’

‘Of course I am’ Cam snapped back, unable to control himself. ‘What the hell am I supposed to say to her? I’ve never met her before and I’m supposed to marry her? She’s just a child...’

‘I know it’s not easy but...’ Luke paused in thought. ‘I don’t know exactly what’s been going on, but I know you’ve been...’ he broke off suddenly, as if unsure of how to proceed. ‘You could be safer with a wife by your side’ he finished. ‘It could...help you to become stronger also...to have something to protect...’

‘I’m not so sure’ Cam spoke slowly. ‘Whatever dangers we suffer here...I would hate to bring another person into it all.’

‘Well...’ Luke grumbled. ‘It could go either way.’

There came a knock on the door.

‘That will be them’ Luke said flatly rising from his seat.

Cam’s stomach suddenly flipped, and his heart constricted in his chest. He felt panic rise inside him. He couldn’t deal with all that was expected of him.

Please he thought to himself. *Please let it all just be over.*

Cam glanced around nervously as Luke opened the door, staring wide eyed at the two figures that entered the room.

His mother the queen stood there, and beside her a young girl sixteen in age. She was pretty, with light brown hair. The dress she wore was beautiful, red and gold in colour and modest in design, with many frills. To her chest, she clutched a little doll.

Valery stepped forwards timidly, lifting her doll and placing it carefully on the operating table as she went.

She approached Cam; Miranda lingering by the door raised her head as the princess drew closer to Cam.

‘It’s good to see you awake at last’ she said to him. ‘I understand that we are to be married.’

‘Cam’ Luke said to him from beside the door. ‘This is Valery.’

Cam only stared back at her lost for words, unsure of what to say, feeling so out of place and out of his depths.

What am I supposed to say to her?! What would she want me to say?

‘May I...’ Valery spoke, ‘touch you?’

Cam didn’t speak, but he bowed his head in acceptance.

Valery reached for him, moving very slowly with both hands extended.

She held him gently either side of his face, gazing into his eyes, and Cam, through his better eye, gazed back.

Interlude start

‘Aaawwww. Do you see that?’ Isami asked her companion as they stared at the monitor together.

‘What?’ Lucas asked.

‘She likes him.’

Lucas frowned, tilting his head as he studied intensively the image before him. ‘How can you tell?’

‘Because’ Isami gleamed knowingly, ‘I just can.’

She twirled playfully then, turning to face him, Lucas sensing her gaze hesitated, before meeting her eyes.

‘What?’

‘Oh it’s nothing really’ Isami said casually. ‘I was just thinking.’

‘About what?’

‘Us.’

Lucas moved away, avoiding the subject.

‘Please don’t.’

‘Why not?’

She approached, touching him at the chin and turning his head to face her again.

‘You know how I feel about you’ Isami whispered. ‘What are you afraid of?’

‘Look at what happened to Auntie’ Lucas replied automatically.

‘Do you think I would do that to you?’ Isami asked him. ‘You know how long I’ve loved you. I would never hurt you.’

‘I’ve loved one that was dear to me before’ Lucas replied. ‘I am not afraid of death, but of losing one close to me. I’m afraid to love for fear of losing the one I love...as I lost *her*.’

‘Time heals all wounds’ Isami answered quietly.

‘It does’ Lucas replied. ‘But I cannot go through that pain again.’

Isami came before him then, moving uncomfortably close.

‘Isami...what are you....?’

‘Shhh. We are alone now, the others are out.’

‘And Lucretia?’

‘Resting’ Isami replied quickly. ‘She won’t leave her room for a long while now. In her last outing she used much magic. She is exhausted. We are alone.’

Lucas closed his mouth, staring back at her.

Isami leant towards him, reaching for the controls behind him. She typed furiously on the keyboard, changing the image upon the monitor.

‘Love is as much a part of life as death’ Isami was saying. ‘It’s all part of the process.’

On the screen above them, they saw one of the eight, Callista, acting as a servant for a wealthy family out on a picnic.

‘Despite our powers’ Isami gleamed, ‘it’s sometimes fun to hide them...to get a different perspective...to play a different role. Look’ Isami breathed as they watched the scene play out on the monitor. ‘She wishes for children of her own, as Auntie did. But she cannot...not in a clockwork body.’

Lucas watched as Callista, playing the servant, lifted one of the lord’s children, a young boy, carrying him in her arms and tickling him. She looked happy.

‘We shouldn’t be watching this’ he said. ‘We shouldn’t be watching each other.’

‘Why not?’ Isami argued. ‘It’s only for a moment.’

Isami typed on the keyboard again, and another image appeared on the monitor.

‘Castello...at his daughter’s birthday party. Isn’t she a cute girl?’

She typed again, and another image appeared. Tiara, standing in a procession, of figures all in black. The storm in that world at this time raged on, and the sea waves crashed against the rocks of the coast beside them, as on the top of the cliff, the mourners gathered around the stone slab, where a man was laid to rest. A legend. A human who had changed many lives in his own short one. His name would be remembered for many generations.

‘Look at her’ Isami breathed, as Tiara turned towards the storm, head lifted and facing the elements as the rain fell heavily on her face. ‘She misses being a Weather Maker, despite the turmoil it brought her. And...’

Isami typed again on the keyboard, and an image of Reuben appeared. He was deep in woodland somewhere, surrounded by thick foliage. He was sitting beside a human-like creature, a beautiful woman with green-tinted skin and leaves in her hair. An earth elemental, stunningly beautiful and notoriously shy in this world, normally fleeing at the first sign of humans. To get this close to her, Reuben must have spent months gaining her trust.

But then something unusual happened. He reached forwards and kissed her. The elemental did not flinch, but reach for him too, kissing him back.

Lucas raised an eyebrow at this.

‘He never said anything.’

‘Why should he?’ Isami countered. ‘It’s his private affairs. Like you said before’ she smiled at him, ‘you’re brothers...not married.’ She glanced up again at the screen. ‘Look at him. He’s smitten with her. Even *you* must see that.’

‘Yes’ Lucas mumbled. ‘He looks happy.’

Isami flipped a switch then, and the screen went suddenly blank.

Lucas turned away from the monitor, staring back at her.

For the longest time she did not speak, did not move, only leant forwards towards him, hands resting either side of him on the control panel behind. She waited for him to act first, to make his move. To either accept her, or push her away.

Lucas slowly raised his hands, cupping her face gently. Isami tilted her head up to his as he leant forward to kiss her, doing so tenderly at first, and then more forcefully. Isami grasped his forearms tightly as Lucas held her.

Lucas ran his hands down her body and around her waist.

They broke apart then, Isami letting out a gasp.

She sighed, grinning at him, suddenly flustered.

Lucas lifted her then, holding her in his arms. He carried her through the building, away from the monitors and down the corridor.

The door opened as he approached, and closed after him as he entered the room, commanded by his magic.

Lucas placed Isami carefully on the bed, leaning back with a knee resting on the bed, he considered her.

‘Well?’ Isami teased him, trailing her bare foot down his chest. ‘Am I not pleasing?’

Lucas caught her leg, holding it firmly with a hand. He moved it aside, so that she now lay with her legs apart.

Bearing over her, he pressed his body against hers, brushing her hair back with the back of his hand and breathing slowly.

‘I want you Lucas’ she said to him. ‘I want you.’ She gleamed. ‘Do you want me too?’

He narrowed his eyes slyly at her, taking her hand in his, and running it down his own body.

‘What do you think?’ he asked as she felt him. ‘Of course I want you.’

She let out a slow breath as Lucas leant back, reaching for the corset she wore and pulling at the lace methodically, gradually, one by one.

‘I wonder’ he spoke slowly as he did this, ‘how much you expect from me.’

‘For the meantime’ Isami breathed, ‘all I want is you.’

Lucas paused then, finger and thumb holding the last thread.

He pulled, loosening her clothing, before pulling the corset apart.

He leant over her again, kissing her deeply. His hand went rigid, and he ran his nails down her chest, tearing at the white under dress. He bit at her neck sharply then, his movements becoming more vigorous, more savage.

Isami moaned as she felt him push into her, his hands finding his way to her.

He grabbed her roughly around the thigh, lifting her legs up as he thrust into her.

The bed creaked with the rhythm until Isami stopped him suddenly, pushing him back.

She rolled on top of him, moving up and down and grasping his hand in hers as he cupped her breast.

Lucas tilted his head back, moaning in pleasure.

‘Don’t stop’ he told her breathlessly. ‘Don’t stop...’

Afterwards they lay on the bed, resting on their sides with their bodies moulded together, Lucas holding Isami firmly to him.

‘Your touch is so gentle’ she whispered. ‘You are ever so tender...yet you have a savage side.’

Behind her, Lucas bowed his head, nuzzling into her neck.

‘Let’s do this again’ Isami beamed, ‘and again...and again.....and again....’

Interlude end

It was many days later, when Cam’s body had healed a little more, that he felt well enough to leave his room.

He wandered the corridors of the palace, followed closely by Valery, whom he had hardly left his side. Cam suspected she had been encouraged to stay close to him, for his own safety perhaps as well as for hers. Cam glanced behind him briefly, seeing his brother and mother trailing after them some distance away. Behind them walked Valery’s handmaiden, and behind her followed what at a glance appeared to be a servant, but Cam knew the man was actually a soldier, an old veteran. Miranda these days often surrounded herself with figures like these, shady and mysterious characters. But Cam trusted them far more than anyone in the palace, save for his own brother and mother.

‘So what was your very first memory?’

Cam turned back to Valery who had spoken. In the time they had spent together, she had asked him many questions like this.

‘My very first memory?’ Cam repeated, slowing to a stop. ‘Let me think.’

He bowed his head, falling silent.

‘I guess that would be...’ he began. ‘The day I fell off my rocking horse. I hurt my knee. My father picked me up, he said something kind to me...and I stopped crying.’

‘Your father?’ Valery turned to him, flicking back her light brown hair as she did. ‘Your father cared for you?’

‘Well...yes’ Cam said hesitantly. ‘Is that...odd?’

‘A little’ Valery replied. ‘To me at least. I hardly saw either of my parents growing up. I was cared for by a whole host of servants and matrons. But they were never the same. Every day was a stranger...but I got used to it.’ She hugged the doll she carried to her chest, dipping her head. ‘I used to watch other children play from the palace garden. The children of the city in which I lived, were cared for by their own parents, and I found this odd. I didn’t know if it

was normal for a mother to care for her own child, but then again...I was a princess.....my life was bound to be different.'

'I don't think it's as easy as thinking of something as being normal or not normal' Cam told her. 'Things are just different for everyone. We never really knew *what* was normal, Luke and I...my brother.' He paused. 'Growing up we wished we had different lives. After our father died...life became harder.'

'Is he your only sibling?' Valery asked him.

'Yes.'

'Really?' Valery seemed genuinely surprised by this. 'I have twelve other siblings, seven brothers and five sisters. They are all older than me...I was the youngest.'

'It must be nice to have a large family' Cam said. 'My family was always small.'

'No' Valery shook her head. 'Half of my siblings are born from another queen, who died due to complications in childbirth. They are all older than me. I hardly know them. And the ones that share the same mother as I.....I hardly know them either.'

'Why is that?'

'I...I don't really know' Valery spoke sadly. 'My older brothers went missing. I was never told what happened to them, but I suspect they were killed in many different battles, in many different wars across many different lands. And my sisters were sold as brides to princes of other kingdoms. I sat at the palace alone so many days, wondering when it would be my turn. The only sibling I ever really got close to....was one of my brothers.' She clenched her teeth, balling her fists as she fought back her emotions. '.....I wonder what he's doing now' she spoke in a distant voice.

Cam watched her for a moment, wondering if he should say anything.

'My room' Valery started, suddenly changing the subject before she could allow herself to dwell on her sadness, 'was a wonderful place.' She smiled. 'It was always so warm, so open and spacious. It opened out onto the orchard where we grew all the fruit for the palace. I would take some from the trees, and sit on my sofa by the window looking outside. I liked to draw everything I saw, and I would place my finished pictures on the wall.' She sighed, grasping the doll to her chest. 'It was always warm in my country, even in winter, and my windows were open all the time. Swallows used to nest in my room, even bees and flowers would thrive there. I used to love watching the little chicks grow, being cared for so lovingly by their parents, and the bumblebees that used to fly into my room to visit the fox gloves that grew in pots in my room. It was truly a wonderful place.' A sad expression crossed her face then, and she looked suddenly forlorn. 'I'm never going to see it again.'

Cam watched her closely, staring at her hard.

'How did you sleep with the windows open all the time?' he asked her. 'Isn't that dangerous?'

'No' Valery shook her head. 'The palace guards were always vigilant, and loyal. And a great golden fence twelve feet high ran all the way around the palace grounds. There was never anything dangerous that happened.'

'Never?'

For some reason, this surprised Cam.

'Your home sounds very different to mine' Cam said.

'It does' Valery smiled. 'It does.' She gazed about her then. 'There are an awful lot of stairs in this palace' she said offhandedly. 'Aren't there?'

Later that evening, Miranda spoke with Cam and Valery.

‘We are to be sharing the same bed?’ Cam repeated.

Miranda gave him a firm expression, a slight sneer playing about her lips.

‘Must I repeat myself?’ she huffed. ‘Is it such an odd thing to share a bed?’

‘But we’re not married yet’ Cam protested. Beside him Valery bowed her head shyly.

‘I know that’ Miranda snapped, losing her patience. ‘Gods I’ve been following you two around all day when I could have been doing something else. I would appreciate being spared the foolish and obvious statements.’

‘But isn’t it....’ Cam began. He hesitated, casting a glance down to Valery standing beside him. ‘Isn’t it inappropriate?’

‘I’ve said this to you before’ Luke told him, speaking in a calming and patient tone. ‘You’re to be married anyway. You may as well get to know each other.’

‘The marriage is next week by the way’ Miranda added casually.

‘Next week?!’ Cam echoed.

‘I’ve said this to you before’ Luke said again. ‘The sooner you two are married, the sooner you can have children and strengthen our family. Look at us Cam’ Luke indicated the four of them standing there. ‘This is all we have. Valery’ he said speaking to her now. ‘How many siblings did you have before you came here?’

‘Twelve’ she replied.

‘And your father, the king is alive?’

‘Um...yes.’

‘And your mother?’

Valery hesitated. ‘Yes’ she replied at last. ‘But she is the second wife. My father remarried after....’

She trailed off. Miranda put a hand on her hips, sighing. ‘The queen is replaceable yet the king is not. How lovely’ she added flatly.

Miranda considered the young princess then.

‘Only the king’s bloodline can rule his kingdom’ she said to her. ‘If Cam were to die before he had children, then you would marry Luke who would become king. If Cam was to die and he had children, then one of his sons would become king and rule over the land. But you will never be in full control. You, if you died, would be replaced with just another princess, but the king...’ she frowned, ‘that is another matter.’ Miranda folded her arms, dipping her head as she thought. ‘When my husband died many years ago, I instantly lost all the power I would have had if he were still alive. The council fought amongst themselves...after the king’s death they became caretakers to the throne, waiting for the day my eldest twin’ she glanced at Cam, ‘came of age.’

‘Are the council the ones who did this to him?’ Valery asked tentatively, glancing to Cam’s injuries.

Cam shifted uncomfortably, suddenly feeling uneasy.

‘Yes’ Miranda said quietly. ‘It is the council that did this to Cam. It is the council that poisoned me...that attempted to kill me several times before. They may even have harmed Luke or at least tried...but I do not know.’

Luke glanced up at the sound of his name, standing there with his arms crossed and a severe expression, though he did not speak.

‘That is why’ Miranda spoke gently to Valery, bending forwards to her level and placing her hands firmly upon her shoulders, ‘you must do this.’ She smiled at the young princess. Her smile was kind, concerned, and genuine. ‘Please look after Cam’ she urged her, ‘and bear him a son.’

As night began to fall, Cam returned to his own room, this time followed by Valery. Up until this point she had stayed in the room opposite Miranda’s. But things had changed now.

Plum, Valery’s handmaiden who had finished cleaning the room, bowed respectfully to the two of them before leaving. She would never be too far away. Her room was just down the corridor from Cam’s. If either of them wanted anything, they would only need to ring the bell.

‘It’s going to be really awkward at first’ Miranda had said to them before leaving them alone, Luke was already gone, having left earlier that day. ‘But’ Miranda had said, ‘you’ll get used to it. It will get easier for both of you. I promise.’

The two were alone now. Cam glanced nervously at Valery, who stood a short distance from him, holding her precious doll.

‘Why do you carry that thing?’ he asked her quietly.

‘It was a gift from my mother’ Valery replied quietly. ‘The last gift she ever gave me...before...I came here.’

Cam lowered his eyes to the ground.

‘My mother never gave me anything.’

He walked away, heading to the bed. He hesitated, glancing back at her.

‘Are you going to sleep now?’ he asked her.

Valery stared at him back, holding herself uncertainly.

‘I...’ Cam began. ‘I just want to sleep.’

Cam began to grow more uneasy when she didn’t answer.

‘What do you normally do before you go to bed?’

‘I...um...get changed into my nightdress.’

Cam paused. ‘There’s a screen over then’ he said, indicating. ‘You can get changed behind that.’

Valery nodded.

‘Thank you’ she said tentatively.

Cam turned his back on her as she moved away. He undressed quickly himself, taking off his shirt and shoes but keeping his trousers on. He went to bed.

Cam lay on his side with his back facing the screen behind which Valery was getting dressed. He listened to the quiet sounds of her movement, the sound of clothes rustling, her steady breaths. It was all too easy to hear in the otherwise silent room.

After a few moments, he heard then the sound of footsteps as she padded closer to his bed. She pulled back then, as she approached it.

Cam turned over, watching her.

‘There’s space’ he said, turning back. ‘Just sleep.’

Valery stared at the back of his still profile for several seconds, before moving forwards. She lifted the sheet and climbed into bed, keeping a space between them. She glanced over to Cam who had not moved, before lying down and resting upon the soft sheets. Beside her, Cam let out a steady breath, before closing his eyes.

The next morning Cam woke early, sitting up and glancing beside him at the profile of Valery who was still fast asleep.

He got up and dressed quickly, leaving the room. When Valery woke next, she found that she was alone. She sat up, leaning against the headboard with the sheets hugged tightly to her. She waited for a moment for something to happen, in case he came back, but after a time she decided to leave her bed and dress. She had many beautiful dresses that she owned. Today she wore a pretty orange and white dress.

Valery glanced briefly at herself in the mirror, tending to her hair before she left the room.

As she stepped out into the corridor, she was caught a little by surprise, starting back and gasping as she saw Cam standing there. He had been leaning against the wall beside the door, resting back with his arms folded.

‘I didn’t want you to walk to breakfast alone’ he explained, as she stared at him uncertainly.

‘Where is my handmaiden?’ she asked him.

‘She came here’ Cam said to the floor. ‘But I told her to leave.’

‘...Why?’

‘I...thought you would like to sleep. I’m sorry if what I did was wrong but...I thought...’ he hesitated. ‘She’s fine’ he finished. ‘She’s just back in her room.’

‘Alright.’

Cam straightened, unfolding his arms and meeting her eyes. ‘Should we go to breakfast then?’ he asked her. ‘Together I mean? I thought that you wouldn’t want to go alone...I mean...you know...’ he trailed off awkwardly.

Valery clutched the doll to her chest.

‘Yes’ she bowed. ‘Let’s go together.’

‘Ok’ Cam chuckled uncomfortably, avoiding her gaze and staring down the corridor. ‘Let’s go...it’s this way...’

They passed a man cleaning a suit of armour as they walked down the corridor, heading to the nearest stairs that would take them to the breakfast hall. Cam had never seen this man before. The man gave the both of them a curious look, something between a frown and a glare. He appeared dressed as a servant in drab clothes, but Cam saw him as something different. He was muscular, older in age than many of the servants in the palace, and there were on closer inspection little scars and nicks here and there on his bare arms and hands and face.

Must be one of mother’s men Cam thought as they wandered past. *She’s guarding me it seems.*

It was then that Cam suddenly realised he hadn’t seen Brioke in ages, or any member of the council for that matter, for which he was extremely grateful.

I hope it stays that way...

As they passed Plum's quarters, her door opened suddenly as she heard them go by. She stepped out of her room, bowing obediently. Valery nodded to her and the handmaiden followed in her mistress's footsteps, walking a step behind with her head bowed and hands together.

When the three of them reached the breakfast hall, which was up and down several flights of stairs, they found that Miranda and Luke were already there waiting for them.

'Ah!' Miranda said as the three of them entered. 'Finally. I would have been getting worried if I hadn't been keeping an eye on you.'

'What do you mean?' Valery asked her.

'I think that man cleaning the suit of armour outside our room is one hers' Cam mumbled to her. 'Isn't he?' he asked speaking clearer as he addressed his mother.

'Well done' Miranda grinned slyly. 'He's not really a servant...but I'm sure you know that.'

Cam took a seat at the table. Valery sat beside him, as she was expected.

'You can sit too' Miranda told the handmaiden. 'I want you to share breakfast with us.'

'Only if you're sure' Plum mumbled with her head down. 'It's usually expected for the handmaiden to remain invisible.'

'Don't be silly' Miranda huffed impatiently. 'Act submissive to others if you must but around me I don't want you acting like a mouse. I've told you before. Speak clearly and look me in the eye.'

Plum raised her head reluctantly, looking at the queen now.

'That's better. Now sit.'

Plum did so, feeling uncertain and a little lost.

'It's ok' Valery whispered leaning closer to her. 'I trust her.'

'Then so do I' Plum spoke quietly back with a smile.

Other servants brought Cam and Valery their breakfasts.

'Another one please' Miranda called loudly to all of them. 'You can see there's an extra person at the table can't you?! If all of your eyes aren't working then I shall remove them for you!'

Very swiftly after that one of the servants brought Plum her breakfast, which was as generous as the ones given to Valery and Cam.

'I don't mean to ask' Plum voiced.

'Louder!' Miranda snapped at her. 'Can't hear you!'

Plum raised her head. 'Why are you kind to me?' she spoke clearly now.

'Because you seem to be important to Valery. I've seen the way she looks at you.' Miranda put her elbows on the table and leant forward. 'I care about Valery. If you are important to her, then you are important to me, and deserve a place at our table. But don't overstep your bounds. Remember, you are still a servant.'

'How noble of you' Luke muttered to himself, lifting a glass to his lips and drinking.

'I think of you differently than I do with the other servants here' Miranda continued, speaking to Plum. 'Now eat. And be silent. I need to speak to Valery and Cam.'

Cam tensed slightly as Valery glanced up from her breakfast.

'The wedding is next week' Miranda began.

Cam's heart began to sink in his chest.

‘We need to begin preparations as soon as possible’ Miranda went on. ‘Finish both of your breakfasts and I will speak again.’

She fell silent after that. No one spoke again in the hall as Cam and Valery began to eat.

Miranda waited for them to finish, biting her nails and scratching at her arms as she did.

Cam felt very uncomfortable in the silent hall.

When they were finished, Miranda led them down to one of the many great halls the palace held. Luke went away to tend to his own business, while Cam, Valery and her handmaiden followed Miranda to the largest of the great halls.

‘This is the most magnificent hall the palace has to offer’ Miranda said, raising her arms to demonstrate the place around them. ‘Here is where they say history happens.’ She lowered her arms. ‘Here is where I was married to your father, where the white king first gained his name all those years ago, where your great great grandfather was assassinated, where peace fell and the old war was first started. But that was all before you were born.’ She turned to Cam. ‘Some call this a magnificent room. I just think of it as another room in the palace.’

Of course you do Cam thought silently to himself.

‘What do you think?’ Miranda asked them.

Cam stared back at his mother, unsure of how to answer. Valery too was silent.

Miranda smirked, turning away from both of them.

This hall will be filled with all the most important figures in the kingdom. The council obviously’ she spoke with a sneer, ‘and all the lords and ladies and Dukes and so forth. Anyone and everyone of importance will be here. I hope you’re prepared for what will be expected of you.’

‘And what will be expected of me?’ Cam asked her miserably.

Miranda glanced back at him briefly, before turning and marching away. ‘Follow me.’

Cam and Valery did so, walking quickly to keep up with her, the handmaiden Plum remained where she was. As they went, Valery gazed at the hall around them in wonder, having never been here before.

Cam cared not at all for it.

He hated this place.

It was a long hall, with tall and narrow arched windows running along the walls on either side, the glass warped like the windows in the rest of the palace. But the glass was clear, no stained glass was in this hall, and the sunlight was allowed to flood into the hall in its natural form, shining upon the deep blue surface of the marble at their feet, which glistened like the ocean on a bright day. The mighty columns, wide at the base and growing thinner as they went up, held up a ceiling that was painted in stars, the columns themselves were intricately carved with ivy snaking its way around. Each single column was made of many different stones, several larger sections for the main structure, then many more for the detail.

There were rows of benches made of white stone and slender in design, and as the three reached the head of the hall, they ascended a steep set of steps. From this point at the top of the steps, it would have been easy to see every face of the many that would crowd the hall the day the wedding was to take place. Where they stood now, was a large space, and as Cam gazed around at the hall before him, he could not deny it, despite the sickness churning in his stomach.

It was a truly magnificent hall beyond compare, and as beautiful a place as the elven cities that Cam read about in his books. He imagined these cities to be the greatest beauty one could construct, the greatest beauty that could possibly exist. This hall matched those cities.

‘This is where you will stand’ Miranda told Cam. ‘The holy man, the one who will marry the two of you, will be standing beside you.’ She turned then, lifting her arm to point back down the hall. ‘Valery will come through those doors. She will be walking alone. You will be carrying Cam’s crown’ Miranda said to her. ‘Hold it in both hands before you like this’ she indicated, holding an imaginary crown before her. When you reach the top of these steps, turn and face your husband. The holy man will begin to speak, Cam will bow, and you will place the crown upon his head.’

‘What...’ Valery began tentatively, ‘what about my own crown? Will Cam give it to me?’

‘No’ Miranda sighed. ‘You will have a tiara, and it will already be on your head when you enter the hall.’ She frowned then, placing a hand upon her hip. ‘All the most important people will be here. Try not to fuck this up.’

Valery averted her attention.

‘We should talk now about what you will both wear on the day’ Miranda said turning away from them and towards a small door, innocuous and painted to look like the stone walls around it. ‘Cam, before you enter the hall, you will come from this door. This is where both your clothes are.’

She entered the room beyond the small door, and Cam and Valery followed reluctantly, stepping in after her.

The room was dark and bare and small, lit now only by the light from the hall beyond. Inside the room were only two things. Two mannequins. One was male, made to fit Cam’s exact measurements, the other was female, smaller in size, like Valery. Both costumes were beautiful.

Cam would be wearing a striking garment of gold fabric, intricately detailed with swirls, and black trousers underneath, with a cloak of vibrant red that would trail from his shoulders.

Valery would be wearing a dress of a deep blue, like the floor of the hall. Even now on the mannequin, the silky material shimmered in the sunlight that shone through the tall windows of the hall through the open door. Valery was still a young girl, only sixteen in age, but the dress would make her look far older than she was. The dress she wore now was modest, covering her shoulders and arms. The dress the mannequin wore ran across the shoulders, leaving the arms bare, reaching low behind her so that her back would be visible. It was a shapely dress, and would show off the figure she was just growing into. The trail of the dress was long, and would reach far behind her as she would walk down the hall towards her husband.

‘Your hair will be beautiful as well’ Miranda was saying as she strolled up to the female mannequin, caressing the blue fabric gently between her fingers. ‘You will look utterly magnificent.....like I did on my wedding day’ she added, in a distant tone. ‘Your measurements will be taken before the day’ she spoke to Valery, ‘and the appropriate adjustments will be made to the dress.’ She straightened, turning back to them. ‘You will be expected to kiss’ she added casually. ‘Be sure that it is not your first time. Remember...the wedding is just next week. You have until then to become properly acquainted with each other...if you know what I mean.’

And then she left the room without another word.

After that, Cam and Valery left the hall, instead wandering to other parts of the palace. Valery had no one else besides her handmaiden, and was afraid to be alone, and Cam too did not want to be parted from her, for fear of being met by Brioke. Anyone who would try to part one from the other would only look suspicious, especially with the wedding coming up. They would be expected to stay together, and for this Cam took comfort.

And besides, he didn't want to leave Valery alone, for his own safety as well as hers.

They walked in silence for some time, heading to no place in particular. Cam walked slowly by Valery's side, feeling very uncomfortable. They walked up and down several flights of stairs, before Valery spoke.

'What do you do for fun?'

Cam was caught off guard by her sudden question, spoken so suddenly after the prolonged silence.

'For fun?' he repeated, finding his tongue. 'I um...I like to read...most of the time.'

'What sort of books do you read?' Valery asked him, turning to face him as they walked.

'I...like....' Cam spoke slowly, pondering the question. 'Anything' he finished, 'everything. There is not a book I wouldn't read.'

Valery stared at him, not looking away.

'I've read...' Cam went on, 'hundreds of books.'

Valery made a face, an expression of awe.

'*Hundreds?*' she repeated.

'Yes.'

'Don't you think you're exaggerating a little bit?'

'No' Cam shook his head. 'I've read hundreds...perhaps more.'

'Where do you find time to read so many books?'

'I have time' he told her, speaking quietly.

'Show me' Valery pressed him. 'Show me where all these books are. We have never had very good libraries where I come from. The libraries were only small; the books were dusty and old.' She smiled shyly. 'I want to see your libraries. I want to see how beautiful they are.'

Cam opened the doors to one of the libraries. The double doors were tall and red, with large brass handles. The room inside was vast, almost like a cavern with a great empty space in the middle, a dusty chandelier above and thousands upon thousands of books set on the many tall shelves made of dark wood.

Valery could not suppress a slow gasp of awe, walking forwards slowly with wide eyes roving all around the room, which was lit by the sun's light shining through several tall windows; the glass was of course warped.

Valery stepped forwards, passing a magnificent statue of the god Faeroe; a figure in the shape of a man. There was a great spiked disk on his back, fox-like ears upon his head, and a long lizard-like tail sweeping around his stone feet. In his hand, he bore a great staff, in the other he wore a strange sort of glove where the fingers extended into knives.

Valery passed this stone sculpture, moving further into the room.

There was an open book upon one of the tables, a chair pulled up beside it. Cam often read several books at one time, and would leave his books open and left about the many different libraries.

Valery glided up to this book, leaning over it.

‘What's this one?’ she asked him.

‘Highlord Vassal and a Sickening Twist’ Cam answered. ‘That is the name of the book.’

‘What's it about?’ Valery asked.

‘It’s about’ Cam began slowly, ‘a dark and dangerous world, where there is no sun.’ He came up behind her, reaching out to touch the page of the book, running his finger over the words.

‘It is the afterlife, a horrible world, where the sea is made of acid, and very few creatures live, in the sea and on land. And everyday’ Cam went on, ‘is a struggle to survive, to find water, food, a place to shelter, safety. It is a world where people live for thousands of years. It is a hell, where each person suffers their punishments for crimes they committed when they were living, over and over again, destined to suffer.’

‘How do they get out?’ Valery asked.

‘By atoning for their sins’ Cam replied, ‘and realising that the world they live in is actually a hell, and their lives, a punishment.’

Valery nodded, her attention sliding to one of the other books.

‘And this one?’ Valery asked, reaching out to another open book upon the table.

‘The Phantom Realm’ Cam replied, ‘a World without Light.’

‘And?’ Valery tilted her head, in what almost seemed like a playful manner.

‘It’s about a merman’ Cam told her, ‘a human of the sea, who gets separated from his family by a storm.’ Cam took the book, closing it and walking with it to one of the shelves. ‘He is found by a wizard, who takes him inland to tend to his injuries, but to save his life when enemies appear, is forced to use magic to turn him human, or else allow him to be killed by the men that appear. The merman, now human in form, spends the rest of the story trying to get back to his family.’ Cam found the empty slot on the bookshelf, lifting the book and pushing it forwards in place with a finger. ‘In the beginning of the story, he is only drawn further and further away from the sea, and away from his father who allows himself to be turned human also in order to find him.’

Cam stepped back, staring at the many colours of the book spines before him.

‘He falls in love with an angel’ Cam went on, ‘and goes on an adventure filled with danger, travelling from the great cities built on stilts in the sky, to the underground caverns, where little elves with green skin live, unable to stand in sunlight...lest they die...’

‘It sounds exciting’ Valery said. ‘Have you finished it? Does it have a happy ending?’

Cam tilted his head back, looking to the books higher on the shelf above him.

‘Yes’ Cam mumbled. ‘He finds his father again, purely by chance. And sometime later, is transformed back to his original form, and returns to the sea once more...to be reunited with his family.’

‘Oh’ Valery sighed. ‘I love happy endings.’

‘It’s why I love to read so much’ Cam said, turning to face her again. ‘It is a wonderful feeling to visit other worlds, and experience so many other stories, from another’s eyes, from another’s imagination.’

‘I thought’ Valery said, speaking tentatively, ‘that a king would be busier than this.’

Cam gave her a level expression, watching her in silence.

‘Don’t you rule your kingdom?’ she asked him. ‘Don’t you look after your people?’

Cam hesitated, forcing himself to speak.

‘The council do much of the work’ he said quietly.

‘I don’t know much about them’ Valery admitted. ‘What do they do exactly? How are they formed?’

Cam looked away.

‘I’ll tell you another time’ he mumbled.

That night, the two returned to the room they shared together. Valery said that she wasn’t tired, and so she and Cam sat on the bed, facing each other as they talked late into the night.

‘Do you like ghost stories?’ Valery asked him.

Cam raised his head.

‘I...’ he began, ‘I don’t...know.’

‘Have you never read any? There must have been some in the many books you’ve read.’

‘Yes’ Cam answered reluctantly, avoiding her gaze as he sat before her on the sheets with his legs crossed. ‘But there aren’t that many.’

‘Do you know any good scary stories?’

‘Not that I remember.’

Valery smiled.

Behind her, her handmaiden Plum was moving about the room silently, tidying around them.

Valery reached over to the bedside table, taking a burning oil lamp and holding it before her.

‘I know a good story’ she said. ‘Would you like to hear it?’

Cam’s heart skipped a little in his chest, and he suddenly felt a little nervous.

The handmaiden had finished her tidying. She exited the room, leaving Cam and Valery alone.

‘Alright’ Cam said to Valery. ‘Tell me your story.’

Valery grinned wider.

‘It is a story’ Valery began, ‘of a man. I forget his name. Let’s call him Sam.’

Cam leant forwards, watching the light from the candle Valery held beneath her, the shadows flickering on her face.

‘One night, Sam woke up deep in a forest. The first thing he knew, was hearing a tapping sound. It sounded as if it were coming from inside his head. But he ignored it, and rose to his feet. He had been lying on the cold and damp earth. The forest around him was dark and eerie. He could hear the creatures in the night calling in the distance. But it did not frighten him, and so, he set his path, and made his way forwards through the dark forest.’

Outside their window, the rain began to patter on the glass. Cam spared one glance towards the falling rain, before returning his attention back to Valery.

‘Sam fought his way through bogs and thorns and the overgrown wilds in the dead of night, guided by only the tiniest rays of moonlight that shone through the thin veil of the clouds above’ Valery said. ‘At last, he came across something. In a clearing upon a rock, there was a woman, kneeling and picking flowers. Sam slowed, standing on the edge of the clearing he watched her, uttering a single word. *Sister?*’ Valery smiled. ‘The woman hearing the voice looked up. Upon sight of him, she dropped the basket of flowers she carried, hand going to

her mouth in shock. She turned and ran away; Sam reached a hand towards her. *Stop!* He cried. But she would not listen. He ran after her, but she was a considerable distance away from him, and she would not stop. She ran over a rope bridge, and Sam without hesitation made to run after her, but halfway across the bridge the rope snapped, and Sam fell into the darkness below him.' As Valery spoke, she held the lantern in both hands before her, cupping the glass gently as the light from the candle danced. 'By the time Sam crawled up the cliff and out of the pit hours later, the woman was long gone, and night was falling again.' Valery paused then, perhaps thinking about the next part of the story. 'He walked for the entire night, until the sun rose, and he found a small village surrounded by mist in the middle of the dark woods. He approached it, thinking perhaps that the woman he had seen might be there. How he longed to see her. But when he stepped between the houses, he found a mob of people waiting for him, and the woman he had been chasing watching from a distance.' Valery sighed. 'They attacked him, driving a spear through his heart and striking him over the back of the head, knocking him unconscious. And when he came too, he found himself in another place entirely unpleasant. He was no longer in the village, but in a graveyard, and not a decent one. Bodies were piled up, and the dead were left where they lay, without being buried. Sam sat up, looking down at himself. He had been stabbed through the heart, yet he was still moving. He had been knocked unconscious, yet he felt no pain, and that tapping, that tapping in his head was happening again, though he didn't know what it was. Sam stood up, looking around. It was a ghastly place he had found himself. But as it had been last time he woke, he made his way forwards, to see what he could find.'

'Did he remember?' Cam spoke up suddenly. 'How he got there, and what happened before he got there?'

'No' Valery shook her head. 'He had no memory.'

Cam bowed his head, falling silent again. He waited for Valery to continue the story.

'He wandered to and fro about the place' Valery went on, 'and here he found many great tombs. Slabs of large square stones sticking up from the earth, many of them were tilted or cracked or damaged in some way. He wandered onwards, descending into a valley, where more of these stones stood. And then he found *her*.'

'His sister?' Cam voiced.

'No' Valery said. 'Not his sister, but the rotting corpse of the princess, his wife.'

Cam swallowed the lump in his throat.

'She was living, but dead. Nothing more than a skeleton with pieces of flesh hanging off. Her lungs and tongue and lips had rotted away, and she could not speak. But by writing in the dirt, she was able to communicate to Sam who she truly was, and who *he* truly was, the adopted prince who was destined to be king, but was murdered by a powerful mage, a necromancer, who had murdered the princess too. The woman he was supposed to rule the kingdom with. And as Sam looked down at himself, and examined himself properly for the first time, he saw inside his own chest through his ribcage. His fleshy heart exposed to the elements beat no more, but was utterly still. This is why he was still moving, after he had been impaled through the heart. This is why he felt no pain, because he was already dead. *How can this happen?* Sam asked himself, hearing the tapping in his head once again. But the princess did not respond to this question. Instead she told him that he had to take back his throne, from the necromancer who took it from him, the man who had killed them both, and

the many other people around them within the graveyard. The soldiers.’ Valery smiled. ‘And so, Sam marched back to the village, from which he would travel onwards towards the palace, with the intentions of taking back his throne with the army of men that followed him, removing the curse from himself and the princess, and restoring their bodies. But when he reached the village, and saw his sister again, he found that he was too afraid to continue. Was too afraid to be seen by her again, knowing now that he was dead. He was encouraged, one last time by the dying princess who accompanied him to continue, to move on through the village and towards the palace, and to kill the necromancer. Sam was about to do so, still frightened as he was, until something stopped him.’

‘What?’ Cam asked when she paused. ‘What stopped him?’

‘The necromancer’ Valery breathed. ‘Sam saw him in the village, holding his sister in his arms, tenderly, kissing her, as she kissed him back.’ Valery took a slow breath. ‘Sam saw with his own eyes that the two were in love, and so, his last ounce of strength and will upon that sight, vanished, and he returned to the graveyard without even passing the village. He returned to the graveyard, with his dying princess, and the army that were to follow him, and there, he withered away as the necromancer’s magic ate away at him, and his body rotted. It was days later that the princess’s body rotted away so much, that what little muscle she had left could no longer hold her up, and she collapsed, still almost alive. She could only lie on the floor now, watching the sky darken and lighten as the days passed, until at last what little that was left of her brain, completely disappeared. The army rotted away also, and Sam, sitting upon one of the great grey slabs of stone, one of the many graves in the field of ash, slowly rotted with them, sitting upon that rock, simply waiting for his fate. When enough of his head had rotted away for him to reach inside, he pulled out at last the thing that was causing the tapping. A little spider that had crawled into his ear when he died, and could not get back out. He flicked it away, setting it free, before sitting back upon the stone slab, and waiting. And in time, his bones would be indistinguishable from the many that lay scattered in the field. The grass grew over his bones, and the field of ash turned green. And as more time passed, everybody forgot that he ever even existed. The forgotten prince.’

Cam listened silently in awe as the story finished.

He sat back, thinking.

‘He died...’ Cam spoke slowly, ‘and suffered...because he was too scared to fight back...too scared to be strong.’

He fell silent then, his mother’s lessons echoing in his head.

The weak die, and if you are not strong, then you will suffer. Only the strong make it in this world.

‘Nothing lives forever’ Cam mumbled, speaking almost to himself. ‘In the end...everything dies.’

‘...What?’

Cam glanced up suddenly, realising he had been talking aloud.

‘Sorry’ he mumbled. ‘It’s just something my mother says.’

He fell silent again.

‘The story...the man... His weakness caused others to suffer too.’ Cam glanced up. ‘Is that it?’ Cam asked Valery. ‘Is that the moral of the story? That only the strong make it in this world?’

Valery hesitated, humming thoughtfully to herself. 'I don't know' Valery said. 'I never really thought about it like that. I suppose...if you think about it that way...then it is.'

Cam smirked humorously.

'It's the sort of story I think my mother would like. Where did you learn of it?'

'I don't remember.'

'Hmm.'

Cam moved away from her.

'I'm going to sleep' he said.

'Wait' Valery whispered, reaching out to him.

Cam tensed suddenly as she held onto his arm. He looked down at her hand as she grasped onto him, before glancing up and meeting her gaze. Her hand went to the side as she placed the lantern she carried upon the bedside table, before she leant towards him.

'W-what are you doing?' Cam stammered, leaning away from her as she drew closer.

Valery pulled back slightly. She didn't answer, only gazed at him, before she moved closer again.

Her lips touched his, as she kissed him.

Cam's eyes grew wide, his heart clenched in his chest.

He pushed her back firmly.

'What are you doing?' he asked again, this time with more force.

She sat back on her heels, looking confused. 'We are to be married' she replied. 'I don't want our wedding day to be the first time we kiss.'

She lifted her hand, touching his cheek, caressing him.

'Stop' Cam whispered, grasping firmly the hand she touched him with. 'I can't...I just.....I can't....'

She stared back at him in shock. He released her hand, and she drew back.

'I'm sorry' she whispered back. 'I didn't want to do anything bad.'

'I know.'

He turned away from her sharply, lying down on his side with his back to her.

'I'm going to sleep.'

She watched him uncertainly for several moments.

Cam lay on his side, listening to the silence. He felt the weight shift on the bed, and heard footsteps as Valery walked away. He heard the rustle of clothes as she dressed into her night dress behind the screen, before coming back and sitting on the bed.

He listened intently, feeling her eyes upon him, before she lay down herself on the bed, and became still.

Cam let out a deep breath, calming his fluttering heart.

He closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Interlude start

After the prolonged murder of her General, Lucretia had travelled to a few of the many other worlds that existed, with the other figures, the ones that together including herself made up the eight.

Here she saw the most incredible things, the most terrible things, the most beautiful, the most painful...

She travelled great distances, and saw things she did not think she would ever see, things she could not possibly have imagined to even exist. But she always returned to the world that was her home. The one known as Lacklustre Paradise. It was a strange place, and one that felt so unnatural to her. But despite this, she had grown to feel positively towards it. In time. And as more time passed, she even began to enjoy living in this strange new world.

But there was a pull within her. Something drawing her away from this home, and to a place she once knew.

Her old home. The world she was born in.

She could never pick up the threads of the life she once lived, but the world itself would always be as she remembered it, no matter how the people might change.

And so, after some time had passed, she returned to this world, and continued her goals where she had left off, in her life before she died.

She achieved more in a few short weeks than she had in all her years in her previous life. And in no time at all, she was the most powerful being in this entire world. Many worshiped her as a living god, many feared her because of her wings, and almost all that had once known her, dared not believe this was the same person.

‘Raksha is dead’ they would say. ‘Raksha is no more.’

Lucretia would visit this world often. She lived in a colossal palace made of gold, and built against the slope of a mountain. The rooms were all beautiful, and the views from the windows were breathtaking. No matter the weather. No matter the time of year. From here, from this palace, Lucretia could see the rest of the world at her feet, the cities now thriving with only the good people she had allowed to live. The graveyards and the barren lands as they had come to be known as, where nothing grew, is where the dead were laid to rest, the dishonest, the liars, the murderers, those that would harm others for their own ambitions, had all fallen by Lucretia’s hand. Some could reasonably argue now that she was the only bad one left, after the so many she had killed.

One morning, Lucretia rose early to watch the sun rise. Standing on the balcony and seeing the contrast in the lands before her. The thriving cities, and the barren lands, and between them, open grasslands and forests and wilderness that separated these two places, where wild animals ran free, and traders travelled through along the many roads.

Lucretia sighed to herself as she saw it all. She thought she was alone, but on this morning, another figure came to join her on the balcony.

‘Vergil’ she said, recognising him. ‘What are you doing here?’

Vergil smiled to her, his expression clear without his mask. He held it in his hand now as he leant on the balcony wall beside her.

‘I came to see you’ Vergil replied. ‘I came to see what you’ve created.’

He cast his sights away, seeing everything that was before them.

‘It’s utterly magnificent’ he breathed. ‘Wouldn’t you agree?’

He glanced to Lucretia. But her eyes seemed bored, her demeanour, dampened.

Then at last she spoke.

‘I have led armies’ she began. ‘I have killed people....but I was always fighting for peace. Sacrifices had to be made, for the greater good. But if I hadn’t been killed...then life for everyone would have been better, perhaps it would have eventually become the way it is now.’ Lucretia paused then, bowing her head. ‘I understand now why my General killed me. He was afraid of change. Afraid for all the people I had already killed; all the people that had to die because of my dream to make a better life for everyone, all the people who were yet to die because of me. Very few had to die now in comparison, because of the power I have gained. I am stronger now than I ever was...but.....I think in a way....that he was right.’

Vergil glanced towards her silently, listening to her speak.

Lucretia continued.

‘How could you find fun in something if it’s no challenge? How can you find danger in something if you cannot be killed? I could try to set other worlds right as I have done this one, but that would take a mere second for me, because I can live forever, and I see no point in it anymore.’ Her eyes grew distant, as she gazed across this new life, the world that she owned. ‘Now...I’ve got nothing to do.’

‘Yes’ Vergil purred beside her. ‘Life is boring without change. Life is boring if we are always happy. We must suffer, must be challenged...for us to become stronger.....for us to *grow*.’

Vergil smiled.

‘That is why we do what we do’ Vergil said.

‘You mean to play with people’s lives?’ Lucretia replied. ‘To torment people?’

Vergil simply watched her.

‘Tell me’ Lucretia said turning to him. ‘Is there an afterlife, and can I still die?’

‘Why?’ he asked turning to face her properly now. ‘Are you bored of this life already?’

‘No’ Lucretia said. ‘Not yet. But if I did wish to die, could you make it so?’

Vergil watched her for a moment longer.

‘There are still ways for you to die’ Vergil told her. ‘But only we know of them.’

Lucretia’s eyes flickered towards Vergil, before she turned her sights away, and towards the kingdom, *her* kingdom, which she helped create, which she had helped rebuild, and made strong again.

‘What will I do with it now?’ she uttered.

‘Whatever you wish’ Vergil replied. ‘It is yours after all.’

Interlude end

The next morning, Cam and Valery woke early. It was a bright day, and the sunlight was streaming into their room, burning brightly on their faces through the window, even as early as it was.

‘It’s so warm in here’ Valery groaned, sitting up in bed and rubbing her eyes.

Beside her, Cam pushed himself up too, sitting on the edge of the bed and panting, his body feeling flushed all over.

‘I think it’s going to be a hot day’ he mumbled, glancing over to Valery.

She met his gaze. Cam felt a twinge in his heart. He clenched his teeth, turning away sharply.

‘I’m...going to wait outside for you’ he said, rising from the bed and not looking at her again as he spoke.

Still dressed in his proper clothes from the day before, he made his way over to the door, slipping quietly through it and into the corridor. Here he let out a deep breath, folding his arms and leaning back against the wall, waiting for her to get dressed.

Further down the corridor, Cam saw the same man he had seen the day before, the burly and aged man who posed as a servant, cleaning the same suit of armour and wearing the same drab clothes a servant wore. None would have spared him a second glance. But if they did, if anyone were to look at him closely, to really notice him, then they would see he could not possibly be what he posed as. A servant would never have so many little scars over their body, scars that could only have been received by fighting.

The unnamed man glared at Cam for a few moments, before looking away, returning his attention to his meaningless task.

Guarding me as usual Cam thought as he watched the man with bored eyes.

Cam waited in silence, hearing only the occasional sound of the false servant shifting, or the chink of the armour as he cleaned it.

He waited for a few minutes, until the bedroom door opened, and he saw Valery standing there.

Cam straightened, feeling a lump in his throat as his stomach wound tightly in knots.

‘You look....nice’ he said awkwardly to her as she stood before him.

Valery smiled sweetly at him, looking down at herself and patting her dress down. She wore a striking red dress with gold beads and black linings. The colours were vibrant, and bold. Cam found himself thinking that she was very beautiful, and found himself thinking what she might look like in a few more years when her body had finished growing. He found the thought caused his stomach to flip over.

‘Right’ he said turning sharply away from her and straightening up. ‘Should we go to breakfast then?’

‘Lets’ Valery replied. ‘I am very hungry.’

As they passed the bedroom door of Valery’s handmaiden, Plum stepped out suddenly, seeing their shadows pass as the light broke beneath the crack under her door. Valery gave her only the briefest of acknowledgments as Plum followed a step after them, walking with her head down and hands together. She smiled at her mistress as they moved on.

Together, the three of them traversed the many stairs within the palace, until they reached the breakfast hall.

‘Oh finally’ Miranda groaned the instant they had appeared. ‘Did you get lost or something?’

Cam closed the large door after him, following Valery and Plum as they headed towards the table in the centre.

Miranda and Luke were already finishing their breakfasts, it seemed they had both gotten up early too because of the heat.

Cam and Valery sat side by side, as they did so, Luke who sat at the table also glanced up at them, giving Cam a brief acknowledgement, before returning his attention to his plate.

‘How was your second night together?’ Miranda asked them, as servants hurried forwards to bring them their food.

‘It was....fine’ Cam finished, as his food was placed before him.

‘Valery’ Miranda asked. ‘Has Cam been good to you?’

‘Yes’ Valery spoke quietly as she sat beside Cam. ‘He’s very kind to me.’

Cam watched her as she spoke, looking away when she had finished, though he remained silent.

Miranda frowned at both of them, leaning forwards on her elbows as she watched them closely.

‘Have you fucked yet?’

Cam’s heart constricted in his chest as his head snapped up.

Beside him Valery looked equally as shocked.

‘Really mother’ Luke protested at this. ‘What is the matter with you?’

‘Quiet’ Miranda snapped at him, before turning back to Cam. ‘Well?’ she asked her son. ‘Have you?’

Cam’s cheeks flushed as he stared back at her.

‘I...n-no.’

‘Why not?’

Cam drew back slightly, clenching his teeth. ‘I...’ he began, ‘I can’t just *do* it....’

‘Enough of this’ Luke growled angrily at her. ‘Will you leave him be? Things are difficult enough as they are.’

‘I do not intent to make you feel awkward’ Miranda continued ignoring Luke, ‘but the wedding is only next week’ she reminded them all sternly. ‘Less than four days away.’ She paused. ‘Time is incredibly short. It’s imperative that you two become as familiar with each other as you can and quickly. You are to be married, and the sooner you have children, the sooner you will become stronger. You don’t want to be thrown down the stairs again do you?’ she finished, addressing Cam.

Cam shot her a frightened glance, suddenly alarmed.

‘Don’t give me that look’ his mother told him shortly. ‘I’m not stupid. I know someone did that to you deliberately. Am I’m sure *she* isn’t stupid either’ Miranda said, jerking her chin towards Valery, who sat there looking shocked. ‘My dear’ Miranda said to her. ‘No one would dare harm you if you act like the queen you’re supposed to be. The same goes for you Cam’ she said to him now. ‘Act the king, and no one would dare lay a finger on you again.’

‘What about father?’ Luke spoke up suddenly.

‘Your father was a fool’ Miranda snapped turning to him. ‘He was too kind hearted, he didn’t believe that people were capable of terrible things, didn’t believe there was true evil in the world. He was an easy target for anyone who wished to harm him. He was naive, and stupid. And besides’ she said turning away. ‘He died of an illness. He died because he was sick.’

Luke turned away sullenly.

Miranda raised her head, looking at Cam now.

‘I don’t know who hurt you’ she said to him, ‘but don’t let it happen again. The next time someone tries to hurt you, fight back. Remember, the weak die in this world. Only the strong

survive.’ She paused then, regarding her son. ‘Nothing lives forever’ she told him, ‘and in the end, everything dies. Remember that. Your time on this earth is short. Make the best you can...with what you have.’ She rose from her seat suddenly, moving across the hall and towards the door. ‘Don’t forget’ she added promptly before she left the hall. ‘The wedding is less than four days away. Do what you must in the time you have before that.’ She turned and opened the door behind her, slipping through it and snapping it shut.

Once she was gone, Luke rose from his seat, nodding to both Valery and Cam, before following after his mother and out of the hall.

Cam and Valery were left in silence.

They each ate their breakfast without speaking, without looking at each other.

When Cam was finished, he waited for Valery. When she was finished, he rose from his chair silently and made for the door. Valery instinctively followed after him, and trailing after her, was Plum, though they had both forgotten about her.

Cam was making his way back to his room, simply heading to a place to be, walking ahead of Valery as he went.

He was marching down one of the many corridors, when Valery stopped him.

‘Cam’ she spoke up. ‘Stop for a minute.’

He did so, glancing back at her reluctantly.

‘I hate to say it, but your mother is right.’

Cam watched her with a stoic expression as she spoke, listening silently and with gritted teeth.

‘We...’ Valery spoke tentatively now, ‘should become familiar to each other. She is right. The wedding is next week and...we are to be married...’ She bit her lip then, glancing away, before looking firmly back at Cam. ‘Kiss me’ she said to him.

Cam blinked, drawing back slightly in surprise.

‘Please’ Valery said. ‘I think...you have been kind to me. I haven’t known you for long, but I think that you would be a good husband...and a good king...and father....and...’ she drew a deep breath, shuddering slightly as she did. Cam noticed how tense she was as she met his gaze again. ‘I want you to love me’ she said to him. ‘I’ve come to this strange place, with these people I do not know, in a foreign land I’ve never seen before. I want to make this place my home so that it’s not strange any more.....I want *you*.’ She breathed slowly. ‘I want...’ she whispered. ‘Please...kiss me.’

Cam watched her mutely, hesitating. Then he turned to face her properly, straightening up.

Valery watched him as he stepped closer to her, placing his hands gently upon her shoulders.

Behind her, Plum watched as Cam leant closer to her. Valery raised her chin slightly, and Cam’s lips touched hers gently as he kissed her.

Around them, the corridors were silent and still, nothing moved.

Cam leant back then, straightening up and taking his hands off her shoulders.

She smiled up to him.

‘I think’ she spoke slowly, ‘that I will be happy with you.’

A few days passed, and Cam and Valery spent every moment together. They used what little time they had to get to know one another as best they could. Valery was even beginning to smile, as she became more comfortable in her surroundings. And Cam in turn, felt the same way. The memory of Brioke was only a faint one now, having not seen nor heard a whisper from him in days. Not since *that* day. That day he had fallen from the balcony.

Cam took it as a sign, a positive one, and he was pleased to see when he looked in the mirror in the mornings, that his injuries, over time, were slowly beginning to heal.

And Cam, was happy, despite his mounting nerves.

‘The wedding is tomorrow’ Valery had said to him. ‘It’s so soon now.’

Cam glanced nervously at her, before looking away again.

‘Yes’ he mumbled under his breath, ‘...it’s so soon.....’

It had been crowded in the temple on this day. People flocked now to hear the holy men preach, and came more often to worship.

‘This is excellent’ the holy man named Fulcrim spoke, ‘really really excellent.’

He stood at the head of the temple now, watching as the crowd filed out of the large hall through the small double doors. It took several minutes for them all to leave, only when they had all gone and the hall was silent, did Fulcrim speak again.

‘I am very pleased. Never before have we had such a turnout.’

The figure beside him began to fidget then, shuffling his feet and casting his eyes to the ground.

‘Do you think it’s right though?’

‘What do you mean Theat?’ Fulcrim asked, a flicker of annoyance crossing his brow.

‘Don’t you worry that they only worship out of fear?’ the younger holy man asked. ‘Is it right to do things in such a way?’

‘A shepherd needs to protect his flock’ Fulcrim replied turning to the apprentice, ‘even if he must be harsh in doing so. The people need a firm hand; we are here to guide them after all. They need us.’

‘I understand’ Theat bowed.

Fulcrim nodded distractedly. He spoke, addressing the three figures standing in a row nearby.

‘You may go now’ he said to them. ‘Return to your lessons and do whatever you must.’

The three figures, all young men bowed, placing the things they had been carrying upon the altar beside them. A thurible, a metal censer suspended from chains in which incense was burned, a shallow bowl of water, in which the sinful were purified, and a burning candle made of black wax, to symbolise the fire the unholy were burned in, the heathens, whores, betrayers, the gypsies, the disfigured and disabled, anyone who deviated from the ‘norm’.

These three figures were young men in training, one day they may hold sermons of their own, one day they would be doing what Theat was doing now, an apprentice, and a personal favourite of one of the graduated holy men. Not everyone would be so lucky. When Fulcrim died, Theat would inherit everything, all his wealth, all his followers, his status, perhaps even the temple itself, his home, even his wife and if they were below a certain age, his children too.

Theat watched the three younger men hurry away, one of them cast him a glance as he went, and Theat saw the resentment in his eyes. Many would do almost anything to be where Theat was now, personally chosen by Fulcrim, the highest ranking holy man in the kingdom. Theat's future was a safe one. No matter what happened from now, Theat was guaranteed to live well and be rich. His future was set, and one day people would answer to *him*, one day people would worship *him*, almost as much as they did the gods themselves.

Fulcrim sighed wearily, running his hands through his thinning hair.

'Come Theat' he said to the young man. 'Let's go to The Back.'

The Back were the quarters of the temple where only the holy figures were allowed to go. It was where the meetings were held, lessons were taught, and where the holy figures relaxed when they were not preaching. They were comfortable quarters, with no expense spared. Many often said they were as beautiful and grand as the rooms of the palace itself.

'That's better' Fulcrim sighed again a short while later, closing the door after him and turning back to Theat who waited silently. 'That was exhausting.'

He moved across the short hall and into the next room, his own personal office.

Everything around them was brightly lit and striking, the marble floors intricate and brightly coloured. The office around them was large, great tapestries with depictions of the seven gods hung from the walls, the most beautiful things seen many would say. All of them were here. Micro with her one wing curled around her body and her golden hair shining like the sun. Faeroe, with the great disk on his back, his fox-like ears and lizard tail sweeping around his feet. There was Ludus with her golden crown, the young boy Filis with his six wings, Zeana with her curved horns and pointed ears and hair tied around her own eyes. Ezla, a man growing out of rock with sharpened claws, and finally Kachi, a beautiful maiden and mother of the sea, where it was believe all life began.

Theat stood silently in the centre of the bright room as Fulcrim went over to the grand cabinet where all his drinks were kept.

'How are your studies coming along?' he asked distractedly, sifting through the cupboard and taking a glass for himself as he chose a bottle.

'Well enough' Theat answered politely.

'It's not easy. You've come a long way it's true, but you still have a long way to go before you get to where I am.'

'I understand.'

'I don't think you do' Fulcrim countered, sitting back in the large leather chair behind the grand desk.

He placed the bottle on the desk after pouring himself a glass.

'The work doesn't stop when you've reached the top' Fulcrim continued. 'It only gets harder.'

Theat raised his head slightly.

'You have doubts?' Fulcrim asked him.

'It's just....'

'Speak' Fulcrim ordered. 'What's on your mind?'

'I feel sort of bad' Theat began, dipping his head now, 'for all the people that have died in the fires.'

'They must be purged' Fulcrim told him shortly, 'for the better people to be left.'

‘But shouldn’t we try to help them?’

‘Some people will not be helped.’

‘What about their families?’ Theat asked. ‘Last night I saw a boy walking through the streets alone. Both his hands were burned, and his arms too...all the way past his elbows.’

Fulcrim listened silently as his apprentice spoke, doing so slowly, deliberately.

‘When I spoke to him’ Theat continued, ‘he said he had tried to pull his mother from the pyre as she burned alive. It was a horrible thing’ Theat mumbled, ‘to see the pain in his eyes.’

Fulcrim listened silently, nodding his head.

‘Tell me’ he said. ‘What do you see when you look outside, when you walk these streets?’

Theat glanced away, towards the window and outside.

‘I don’t know’ he mumbled. ‘I see many things.’

‘This world is full of suffering’ Fulcrim said, before drinking from his glass. ‘This life is hard. We endure these torments now, so that we can live a better life in the next, a better life in paradise.’

‘What’s it like?’ Theat asked. ‘The afterlife?’

‘What’s it like?’ Fulcrim repeated with a smile. ‘It’s whatever you want it to be.’

Theat nodded to himself. ‘In that case...’ he said slowly, ‘it’s going to be the most wonderful place.’

Fulcrim smiled.

‘Bring me that book over there’ he pointed to the ornate bookshelf in the corner. ‘We need to continue with your lessons.’

Theat did as he was told, moving over to the shelf and searching for the book that Fulcrim pointed out.

‘Which one was it?’ he asked, staring at the spines of the books before him. He paused, waiting for an answer. ‘Fulcrim?’

He listened, hearing no reply.

He turned back.

‘Fulcrim?’

Fulcrim’s drink slipped from his fingers then and he tipped sideways, falling to the floor.

Theat ran to him, shaking him and calling his name, before running to get help.

The entire temple was roused, as people gathered at the office where Fulcrim had fallen.

But it was already too late.

‘The wedding is cancelled.’

‘What?’

‘For the moment’.

‘I don’t understand.’

Miranda crossed her arms, regarding her son with an expression that suggested she was hiding her true emotions.

‘The wedding is cancelled’ Miranda repeated.

‘What?’ Cam said again.

‘Are you trying to be annoying?’ Miranda hissed.

Cam fell silent, glancing away and gritting his teeth.

‘What do you mean it’s cancelled?’ Valery asked as Cam began to shuffle uncomfortably beside her. ‘Why?’

Miranda uncrossed her arms, turning and walking away across the small office, towards the large window, through which was a dark night beyond.

‘I hate these windows’ Miranda sneered, facing the warped glass. ‘I miss being able to look outside. The city...despite the fact that I hate it...’ she paused, ‘...it does look pretty in some lights.’

Miranda turned back to Cam and Valery. Luke was there also, leaning back on a desk with his arms crossed and a pained expression upon his face. He had not spoken in a very long time.

‘The holy man that was supposed to marry you has died’ Miranda began. ‘The council claim that it was his rich lifestyle that caused his heart to give out...but I know different.’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘My people’ Miranda whispered, ‘the few soldiers that are loyal to me, that once loved your father’ she spoke to her sons, ‘began an investigation in secret.’ She paused. ‘They found traces of a foreign chemical in his sleeping quarters’ Miranda said. ‘They don’t know what it is, but...it shouldn’t have been there.’ She paused again. ‘They believe it was a harmful substance.’ Miranda tilted her head as she considered the young couple before her. ‘The council don’t want you to get married it seems.’ She huffed, shifting quickly in agitation. ‘I should have seen this coming. I made a silly mistake in overlooking it.’

‘Can’t someone else marry us?’ Valery asked tentatively.

‘Unfortunately’ Miranda said speaking to her, ‘all of the other holy figures that have the power to do so have conveniently left the city on *other business*.’ She sighed. ‘No doubt the council’s doing also.’

‘When did this man die?’ Cam asked his mother quietly.

‘Last night.’ Miranda ground her teeth. ‘The council are sloppy. Their lies are weak and their trail is more than easy to follow. My mercenaries found the poison in minutes.’

‘What do you mean his lifestyle killed him?’ Valery asked. ‘You said...that the council told you that’s what actually happened.’

‘He was a fat man’ Miranda said bluntly. ‘He liked to eat, liked to drink.’ Miranda raised an eyebrow. ‘He liked his women, despite being...hmmm...an older gentleman. Not an old man by any means, but certainly not in the prime of his life anymore. They said he lived too luxuriously, and *that* was his eventual end.’

‘What are we going to do?’ Plum spoke up suddenly. Until that point she had been near enough invisible, hanging in the shadows and as silent as the grave. ‘Is Valery’s life in danger?’

‘All our lives are in danger’ Miranda turned to her. ‘Everyday...until we die.’

‘You know that’s not what I mean!’ Plum sobbed, becoming hysterical now. ‘I can’t face it if something happened to Valery’ she cried. ‘She is too dear to me!’

Miranda stormed up to her in a few short strides and slapped her hard. Plum stumbled, holding her cheek and turning back to the queen in shock.

‘Act this way and you will be the first to die’ Miranda said coldly to her. ‘Only the strong make it in this world.’

‘Are we...still to be married?’ Cam asked his mother, as Plum took a step back, bowing her head to hide her tears. ‘Is Valery really safe?’

‘I don’t know’ Miranda said turning to him, ‘I don’t know what's going to happen anymore.’

‘Can I ask you a question?’ Valery spoke up later that day.

Cam raised his head slightly. They were lying on the bed together, relaxing in the hot room. Cam lay on his front hugging a pillow, and Valery lay on her side, fanning herself.

‘What is it?’ Cam asked her.

‘I don’t really know how to phrase this’ Valery said, ‘but you're a king aren’t you?’

Cam rolled over, resting on his side to see her better.

‘Yes’ he said, his tone confused.

‘I've not seen you...well...’ Valery began to fidget uncomfortably. ‘You’ve spent this whole time with me, which is nice and all but...who is ruling the kingdom for you? I've not seen you...you know...do any of the things my father, the king in my old kingdom did when I lived there.’

Cam watched her closely as she spoke, waiting for her to finish.

‘Don’t you have any meetings, important people to see, places to visit, paperwork and taxes and organising your army and foreign affairs and so forth?’

‘Oh’ Cam mumbled, moving to lie on his front again, chin resting on the pillow he clutched to him. ‘The council does a lot of the work for me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They rule this kingdom for me’ Cam explained. ‘I don’t have to do much at all.’

‘But...’ Valery began, ‘it’s *your* kingdom...’

‘Did your father not have help in running his kingdom?’ Cam asked Valery, glancing back at her.

‘A little...I think but...’ Valery began to fidget. ‘He was always busy. Nothing happened without his knowing, and if it did, then people were punished.’ She paused then. ‘My father could be ruthless. If anyone betrayed him...well.....it didn’t happen too often, put it like that.’

Cam blinked slowly.

‘How do you know what happens in your own kingdom?’ Valery asked him.

‘I have meetings sometimes with the council’ Cam said.

‘Are those meetings held on their terms or yours?’

He hesitated.

‘Do you believe everything they tell you?’ Valery asked him. ‘How do you know anything they say is true? They could be lying.’

Cam chewed his lip uncertainly, feeling a stirring of emotions within that he had not felt before.

‘Have you ever spoken to your own people?’ Valery asked. ‘Have you ever had an audience with a citizen, and asked them directly what they think about your rule?’

‘And what should I ask them?’

‘Anything. There is a lot involved in ruling a kingdom, and there is a thing called the law of unintended consequences, which is the actions of people having unanticipated results.’

‘Like?’

‘Liiiike’ Valery thought. ‘Poisoning a river to kill the fish that are eating the crops, and destroying a food supply for the sea eagles that feast on them, killing *them* off too.’

‘Did that happen?’ Cam asked curiously, sitting up.

‘Yes, in my kingdom’ Valery said. ‘The sea eagles were a beautiful and slender creature, with long beaks and talons, but died off after the river was poisoned. The crops thrived after that, but the sea eagles, a curious bird who also fed on the parasites that plagued our livestock, were no longer there to do so. And shortly after, the meat became infected and inedible. It took years to make things right and return things to the way they were before. My father learned his lesson after that, and was more careful in every decision he made, from farming to politics....and everything in-between.’ Valery sat back, hugging her precious doll closer to her chest.

‘A good king listens to his people directly. It’s hard, and you can’t please everyone, but a good king would at least try to please the majority.’

‘He would?’

‘Of course’ Valery laughed. ‘Isn’t that obvious?’

Cam frowned in thought at this, the cogs in his mind whirring.

‘I think you should have an audience with your people’ Valery said distractedly. ‘Don’t you agree?’

‘Yeah’ Cam mumbled. ‘I think you’re right.’

‘You don’t want to let the council do all the work for you all the time. Otherwise, they are the true kings, and you are nothing but a vassal...a shadow king.’

Cam went silent.

He thought hard about what she said, and despite her youth, he felt that she was wise beyond her years.

What have I really done for myself as king?

‘How are the council formed anyway?’ Valery asked him.

‘Oh’ Cam said. ‘There are two sides of the council. The left hand, and the right hand of the king. One hand manages the people, and everything related to *home*, the other hand deals with all foreign affairs, such as the army and keeping peace with neighbouring kingdoms. But neither side has any clear roles or motives, and sometimes their work crosses over to the other hand. They work together’ Cam explained. ‘There used to be forty members of the council. Now there are less than fifteen.’

‘What happened to the others?’ Valery asked.

‘They died’ Cam mumbled, ‘through illness or accident.’

‘Where they murdered?’

Cam glanced around at her, meeting her gaze.

Valery stared back unblinking.

Cam did not answer.

‘When I become queen’ Valery told him shortly, ‘there will *be* no council.’

‘No council?’ Cam repeated, becoming tense suddenly ‘But...who will do the work that they do now?’

'We will' Valery smiled to him. 'We'll do it...together. This is our kingdom after all. We can do whatever we like.'

'Do you think that is possible?' Cam whispered.

'Yes' Valery answered quietly back. 'Together...we can do anything we want.' She smiled at him sadly then. 'No one will ever hurt you again' she said to Cam. 'Things will be different...once I am queen.'

Downstairs, listening a floor below through the grate in the fireplace, was Brioke, hearing every word.

Rising from his seat by the wall, he turned and walked away.

Interlude start

Reuben crept through the woods silently. Only when he was sure he was alone, only after walking for several hours, did he remove his mask.

It was daytime now, and the woodland he found himself in was far removed from any forms of civilisation in this world. This forest was a world of its own, with the most fabulous creatures anyone could possibly imagine. That is, if you were lucky enough to see any of it. Almost all of the creatures in these woods were extremely shy or timid or just plain scared of people. Any hint of a human in this home and they would be sent running. But evidence of their presence was everywhere.

Reuben stopped, looking all around him, tilting his head back to the canopy of leaves above him. The branches and foliage was so thick, the sun struggled to fight through. And yet the forest was bright.

This was a strange world. The forests were so full of life, yet to those who were foreign to it, felt so empty.

Reuben cast his sights down at the moss at his feet, which seemed to almost glow.

The sunlight from above could not reach the world beneath the canopy, and yet the forest itself seemed to glow.

'Magnificent' Reuben breathed, raising his head again. 'Utterly magnificent....'

He heard a sound then. It was only very faint, most people would surely have missed it, but Reuben's senses were keen. He turned his head to the side, tilting his head towards the noise. For several seconds there was silence, and then Reuben saw a hand appear from behind one of the trees.

Reuben watched.

The hand snaked around the tree, and the figure stepped out from behind it.

Reuben drew a slow breath as the figure came into view.

She was an earth elemental, a beautiful woman with green-tinted skin. Her green hair was long and lush and thick. There was ivy bound around her wrists and ankles, winding up her body, and there were thick leaves in her hair which she wore like a crown.

The earth elemental took a small step forward.

‘Every time I see you’ Reuben whispered, ‘it is as if it’s for the first time.’

She bowed her head shyly, smiling at the ground.

‘Each time I see you’ Reuben said, ‘you take my breath away.’

She raised her head again, gazing deeply at him with her strange eyes. They were vibrant orange in colour, the pupils vertical slits, like a cats.

She approached him, and he reached for her, fingers unfurling as he brushed her cheek. But she did not flinch.

‘You’re so beautiful’ he sighed.

She smiled at him.

The earth elemental had no name, and so Reuben had just nicknamed her Love. She was the only being he had seen of her kind in this forest, though Reuben doubted she was the only one. It was many years ago that Reuben first saw her by chance, just once. And then he came back to this world, time and again for several months with hopes of catching even a brief glimpse of her. And then one day, after Reuben was beginning to think that he would never see her again, she appeared before him, standing in a glade, stunningly beautiful, her skin glowing and her eyes bright. He had taken but one step towards her, causing her to flee. She was gone, but Reuben was sure from that point on, that she was real. He had caught another glimpse of her, and now was determined. It was many years after that, after long and agonizing months of gaining her trust, that they shared their first kiss.

‘Love’ he said to her, addressing her by the nickname he had given her. ‘Let’s walk together.’

They moved side by side through the woods, maintaining only a short distance between them. Love seemed happy, though she didn’t often express her emotions, Reuben could see it in the way she walked, the way she held her head high. Sometimes he wanted to sweep her up in his arms. But he knew she wasn’t like that. He had learnt that she needed her space, and had to be careful whenever he touched her. Everything had to be on her terms, and he had to read the signs, to know if she was ready for him to move closer. Or else he would scare her away.

They walked for several more hours in complete silence. Reuben had often thought in the past that such a journey on bare feet would be hard for the earth elemental, who Reuben initially thought was a fragile creature. But Love was stronger than she looked. Reuben found himself wondering if other earth elementals were the same. He didn’t know. Love had been the only one he had ever seen.

‘This is fine’ she said at last, coming to a stop.

Reuben glanced around them. The forest here was just as beautiful as the rest of the forest he had seen so far, but the trees seemed just a little closer, the foliage around them, thicker.

Love turned to Reuben, wearing the same level expression she almost always wore.

Reuben whispered her name, reaching out to her, and making sure she knew what he was doing.

He took a step forwards, and kissed her tenderly, still maintaining a small space between them.

She smiled to him suddenly as he stepped back, her cat-like eyes glowing. She stepped away from him, lying back on the forest floor.

‘Come’ she whispered to him. ‘Lie down with me.’

Reuben took a tentative step forwards, moving around and lying down beside her.

These two unusual creatures, the earth elemental and the plague mask wearing figure lay on the forest floor, side by side.

Love tilted her head back, eyes closed and smiling in contentment. She breathed a slow sigh, before opening her eyes again, and turning to face Reuben beside her.

‘It is so beautiful in this forest all the time’ she said to him, ‘even on the darkest days.’

He turned to face her also, feeling the grass between his fingers as he lay there.

‘It is’ he said. ‘It’s a beautiful forest.’

Love looked ahead again, staring at the canopy of leaves above.

‘I never want to leave this place’ she whispered.

‘You never will.’

‘You won’t try to make me?’ she asked quietly.

‘I wouldn’t even dream of it.’

Love blinked slowly, staring upwards to the sky overhead.

‘I want...’ she began, ‘...to be one with you.’

Reuben watched her closely; unsure of what was her meaning.

She turned to face him, lying on her back on the soft grass.

‘You named me Love’ she said to him. ‘Show me what it means to be loved.’

‘You want...’ Reuben began, ‘...me to touch you?’

‘I want...’ Love whispered, ‘to feel every part of you.’

Reuben watched her for a moment longer, before moving closer, careful to let her see every action he was about to do, and moving slowly so as to keep her calm. She could be ever so fearful at times.

He leant over her, kissing her ever so tenderly, before caressing her shoulder, moving his hand down her body.

He lifted his leg over, kneeling over her now, their bodies so close together as he felt her sweet breath upon his lips.

Reuben leant back, gazing into her glowing orange eyes; the vertical slits to him were so strange.

She lay there, allowing herself to be touched, her body relaxed, inviting him to move further.

Reuben read her body language, stroking her cheek with one hand, and with the other, moving down her thigh.

He parted her legs, positioning himself as he kissed her again.

Love drew a sharp intake of breath, arching her back suddenly.

Reuben bowed his head, his hold on her tightening, as they made love on the forest floor.

Interlude end

Days passed, and Cam and Valery never parted and were together every waking moment, and at night of course, they slept together also, though Cam had dared not touch her.

One day, when Cam and Valery were in one of the many libraries she spoke, after a long time of silence.

‘What do you think our children will look like?’

Cam glanced up at her from the sofa he rested on, the book he had been reading upon his lap.

‘I don’t know’ he replied. ‘I never really thought about it.’

‘Never?’ Valery cocked her head.

Cam watched her silently. She sat at the table now, her own book open before her. She had been reading about the histories of the kingdoms. Cam had as usual been reading novels, being drawn more to the lives of people imagined by others, finding awe and wonder at the adventures of the heroes within the pages.

‘No’ he answered at last. ‘I never have.’

Valery sighed to herself, turning away as her attention drifted back to her book. ‘I do...’ she trailed off, ‘...sometimes...’

Cam watched her for a few moments, before looking back to his own book and continuing to read.

Minutes later, Valery raised her head again, gazing at the windows around them.

‘Why can’t we go outside?’ she sighed dreamily.

Cam glanced back up at her.

‘I miss the feel of the wind’ she said. ‘The sunlight....can’t we go outside?’ she asked him. ‘Please?’

Cam hesitated, every cell in his body screaming against this.

‘Alright’ Cam mumbled, speaking after a long while. ‘We’ll go outside.’ *What am I saying?*

He looked down at his book again. ‘Another time’ he finished. But...’ he continued to read.

‘Not now...’

That night, Cam shook her gently awake. Valery moaned as she turned over, opening her eyes and blinking wearily.

‘...Cam...?’

‘Hey’ he whispered to her. ‘I’m sorry to wake you.’

‘What time is it?’ she grumbled sitting up.

‘I don’t know, but it must be pretty late.’

Valery rubbed the sleep from her eyes, yawning before resting her hands on her lap before her.

‘Why did you wake me? Is everything alright?’

‘Yes’ Cam told her hastily. ‘Everything is fine. Please don’t worry.’

‘Then why did you wake me?’

‘I want you show you something’ Cam whispered back, taking her hand and pulling her gently.

Valery rose from the bed, allowing herself to be led away, padding quietly across the silent room, the cold stone floor chilling her feet.

‘Are you alright?’ Cam asked her.

‘Yeah’ Valery mumbled back, hugging herself. ‘It’s just...’

She froze then as Cam placed something around her shoulders. She looked down at it, holding the coat tightly to her.

‘Is that better?’ Cam asked.

‘Yeah’ Valery whispered. ‘...thank you.’

Cam smiled at her, a genuine smile. Inside he felt a strange warmth that was so foreign to him.

‘Come on’ he said. ‘Follow me.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘I want to show you something.’

‘What is it?’

‘You’ll see’ Cam grinned knowingly back at her.

It was utterly silent in the corridors of the palace at night. Everything was eerily still. The palace was so large that even in the day it was quiet. But at night, it felt like a different place entirely.

‘It’s scary’ Valery mumbled, casting her eyes to the shadows all around and listening to her own voice which echoed back at her.

‘It’s alright’ Cam spoke softly to her. ‘I’m here.’

Valery who had been clutching at her chest, suddenly feeling the absence of the doll she carried around everywhere, relaxed slightly then, turning her head back towards Cam as he walked before her, leading the way.

They traversed the silent corridors of the palace, moving upwards, always upwards, ascending many flights of stairs, until Cam stopped before a small door.

He paused, turning back to her before reaching for the handle.

As Cam pushed the door, allowing it to swing open, Valery saw beyond was a spiral staircase.

‘A tower’ she voice.

Cam dipped his head in acknowledgment at this.

‘Go on’ he encouraged. ‘After you.’

Valery glanced to him, still clutching at her chest.

She looked forwards again, before taking a step.

Valery ascended the stairs slowly, stepping lightly. Cam watched her closely, before walking after her.

Together they walked the spiral path, heading upwards, until they reached the door. Valery paused before it.

Behind her, Cam reached out, pushing the door open for her.

Valery drew a slow breath as the cool night air lifted her hair back, brushing her skin and chilling her body.

She stepped forwards slowly, and out into the open night, unable to keep herself from gasping in awe.

From atop the tower, she felt as if the whole world could be seen. On one side was the city, the capital that was her home, with narrow streets and buildings atop of buildings, and on the

other side, a wide open beach and plains, and beyond, the vast sea, beneath which lay a world that would forever be a mystery.

And in the deep blue sky above them, amongst the dark clouds hung the moon, a perfect circle, and bright orange in colour, elevated above the rest of the world, and hanging there like a strange sphere, so alien looking.

‘It’s beautiful’ Valery whispered.

Cam came to stand beside her, smiling silently.

‘I feel’ Valery spoke slowly, ‘that we are standing in another world.’

‘I come here often’ Cam said to her. ‘It is the only place from which I can see the outside world.’

Valery bit her lip.

‘I want you to promise me something’ she said to him. ‘Tomorrow, I want to leave the palace, and walk out into the palace gardens...no...further...I want to walk the streets, leave the city altogether, go out into the open plains beyond the city. I want to visit the beaches, like you and your brother used to. Do you remember?’ she asked him. ‘You remember that you told me how you and your brother use to escape the palace many years ago when you were younger?’

Cam hesitated then, feeling a little nervous.

‘That...’ he began uncertainly, ‘was a very long time ago. And...it was very dangerous for us. I told you what happened didn’t I? That day I became lost...and the masked figure...’ he broke off.

‘A different time’ Valery finished, turning away from him.

A silence passed between them.

‘You are king now’ she said. ‘You can do whatever you want.’

He watched her uncertainly, before looking away again, tilting his head back, towards the moon.

‘Why does the moon appear orange sometimes?’ Valery asked.

‘It’s to do with the way the light is scattered in the atmosphere’ Cam replied. ‘When the moon is near the horizon, its light must pass through more atmosphere than when it is directly above us. Light is made out of many colours, and out of all the colours....red is the one to travel the furthest.’

Valery asked him playfully. ‘Did you learn that in a book?’

Cam smiled at her, before looking away again.

‘Tomorrow’ he said, ‘we will go outside.’

And for some reason, when Cam spoke these words, he did not feel afraid.

It was the very next morning that Valery woke Cam early. Still tired from the night before, Cam shifted wearily in his sleep, pulling the sheets tighter to him.

‘Oh no you don’t’ Valery giggled, grabbing onto them and pulling them away again. ‘You have to get up. You promised that you would take me outside.’

‘Mmmm...gimee a minute.’

Valery released the sheets she had been trying to tug from him, Cam was holding onto them tightly, despite being half asleep. She padded up to him, standing beside the bed and staring down at him.

‘Get up’ said again. ‘You promised to take me outside. You're not going back on that promise are you?’

Cam groaned loudly.

‘Cam?’ she said sternly.

‘No’ he sighed, opening his eyes fully now and smiling at her. ‘I'm not going back on my promise.’

‘Then get up then. I'm excited and I don't want to wait.’

‘Fine’ Cam sighed, pushing himself up. ‘I'm getting up.’

Valery moved away as Cam rose from bed, bare-chested in the hot morning. Valery sat at the bottom of the bed, holding the doll on her lap and waiting for Cam to get dressed.

Minutes later, he came before her.

‘Ready?’ he asked.

Valery rose, placing the doll on the bed beside her.

‘You're not brining it with you?’ Cam asked, noticing this.

‘No’ Valery beamed. ‘I don't think I need it.’

‘Alright’ Cam spoke with determination. ‘Let's go then.’

They left their room together, descending many stairs as they made their way down floor after floor.

Cam slowed when they came to the entrance hall. The vast hall echoed around them as they stepped forwards, and Cam clenched his teeth, feeling his stomach twinge with nerves as he saw the guards standing either side of the great doors.

‘It's alright’ Valery whispered to him, perhaps sensing his nerves. ‘You are king. You can order them to stand down.’

Cam dipped his head slightly as they walked forwards.

The guards both tensed slightly as he approached with Valery by his side.

‘Your majesty’ they echoed.

Cam stopped before them grimacing.

‘Let us pass’ he spoke firmly. ‘We wish to go outside.’

The guards both hesitated, glancing at each other.

‘The council...’ the braver man began slowly.

‘Are not your leaders’ Valery finished boldly. ‘You take orders from your king. Open the doors, or die.’

They obeyed swiftly after this, both stepping aside and each grasping a handle, they pulled the doors open in unison.

‘Now’ Valery breathed as the wind from outside blew her hair back, ‘we can go where we please.’

They stood before the tall doors of the palace entrance, side by side.

Cam glanced down at her, with a smile upon his face.

‘Ready to go outside?’

She looked up at him, smiling back.

Valery reached out to him, taking his hand in hers.

‘I’m ready’ she whispered. ‘Let’s go.’

Interlude start

Reuben woke the next morning feeling strange.

He groaned, sitting up and holding his head in his hands. He looked down at himself, feeling the touch his own skin, something felt different.

‘What’s happening to me?’ Reuben gasped, turning to Love as she sat up beside him.

‘You are beginning to look more like me’ she smiled.

Reuben gazed back at her, his eyes now vibrant orange and cat-like. Like hers.

‘Why?’ he whispered to her. ‘Why is this happening?’

‘You’ve spent so much time in this world’ Love answered, ‘you are now becoming a part of it.’

Reuben stared down at himself. His hands no longer felt like his own. His skin looked like bark, faded in colour and cracked.

‘Am I going to be alright?’ he breathed.

‘Yes’ Love beamed back at him, not in the least bit phased. ‘Everything is going to be absolutely fine.’

Later that day, they walked through the forest hand in hand, Reuben making the most of their time together before he was to return.

‘I have to go back to my own world’ he said to her. ‘The longer I stay away...the weaker my magic becomes.’

Love released him, turning to face him. They had been walking for hours in complete silence, but Reuben found this comforting, and Love seemed content too.

‘Must you leave me?’ she asked him. ‘Must to continue to use your magic?’

Reuben smiled weakly at her, lifting a hand before him and summoning a ball of glowing light within his grasp.

‘Magic has always been a part of me...but...’ he clenched his fist, and the light in his hand went out. ‘I can feel myself changing’ he whispered, ‘and not just physically’ he said touching his own face where his cheeks had cracked also. ‘I feel...’ Reuben said, ‘I feel....different...*inside*...’

He touched his own chest, placing a hand over his heart.

‘My feelings for you’ he continued, ‘I...I don’t want to go home.’

Love was expressionless as she almost always was. She gave the slightest tilt of her head as she listened to his words.

‘If you don’t want to go home’ he asked him, ‘then why do you return there at all? Does your magic really mean that much to you?’

‘No’ Reuben spoke quietly. ‘I must return to my own world regularly to keep my magic strong but...it’s not that which I care about any more...it’s my brother.’

‘Lucas...’ she spoke his name

‘Yes.’

Reuben bowed his head. ‘I am going to tell him that I’m leaving’ he spoke sombrely. ‘I don’t want to be part of the eight anymore.’

When Reuben returned home, he found his brother.

Lucas stared back at Reuben in shock at how he had changed. It looked now as if he had been born in the world he visited so often.

‘Lucas’ Reuben began steadily as Lucas stood frozen before him. ‘I have something important to tell you.’

Interlude end

It was bright in the entrance hall, but as the doors to the palace were opened and the direct light spilled over them, Cam squinted, shielding his eyes from the glare.

‘Now’ Valery breathed, ‘we can go where we please.’

Cam glanced down at her, with a smile upon his face.

‘Ready to go outside?’

She looked to him, smiling back.

Valery reached out to him, taking his hand in hers.

‘I’m ready’ she whispered. ‘Let’s go.’

Together, they left the palace behind them, moving forwards and down the steps into the garden.

‘The truth is’ Cam told her nervously, ‘I haven’t left the palace grounds in years. I’ve always been too afraid.’

‘You are king’ she smiled turning to him. ‘You have *nothing* to fear. You are the most powerful man in your kingdom.’

‘The most powerful?’ Cam echoed, the words sounding so strange in his own voice. ‘I am the most powerful man in my kingdom’ he mumbled. Cam pursed his lips then. ‘I don’t feel that way.’

‘My father, the king in his own lands, has conquered and killed and ruled. He has led armies across both land and sea, and many people both fear and respect him. But...’ she added quickly with a smile, ‘he was once a child. He once knew nothing, was once like you.’ She smiled wider now as together, they moved down the path away from the palace and closer to the tall gates that led out onto the streets. ‘There is no doubt in my mind’ Valery spoke with confidence, ‘that one day...you will be as mighty as my father.’

‘You really think that?’ Cam asked her, already filled with doubt.

‘Anyone can achieve anything if they put their mind to it’ Valery told him. ‘You are already king, you already hold great power, you just need to learn how to use it.’

‘And how do I do that?’

‘Experience’ Valery winked at him facing ahead again. ‘Through trial and error, as my father has done. Even though he is well aged now, he is still learning.’

Together, they slowed to a stop before the silver gates. Valery cast her hand out.

‘I order you to open these gates now.’

The guards stationed at their posts hesitated for only a moment, and for a moment, Cam considered speaking also, reinforcing Valery’s order. But there was no need. The guards stepped forwards, and as the guards within the palace had done, they opened the way for them.

‘Your majesty’ one of the guards bowed to Cam as he walked by. ‘May I suggest an escort, for your own safety?’

‘What do you think is going to happen?’ Cam asked the nameless man uncertainly.

‘I do not know’ the guard replied, still in his bow. ‘I dare not think. But you are too important to put at risk. Please may I request to accompany you?’

Cam hesitated, glancing uncertainly to Valery beside him.

She shrugged.

Cam looked back at the soldier.

‘Alright’ he said. ‘You can come.’

‘Thank you your majesty’ the soldier said straightening. He stood tall and strong, his weapon sheathed at his side.

The guard said no more, and so Cam and Valery headed into the streets. The nameless guard followed after them a few steps behind, leaving one guard remaining to keep watch over the palace entrance.

‘Where should we go first?’ Valery asked him.

‘I’ve not been out of the palace in so long’ Cam replied, ‘I suppose it doesn’t really matter where we go.’

‘Very well’ Valery replied with a glint in her eyes. ‘Let’s go this way then’ she said, choosing a street at random and making her way forwards.

Cam followed after her, glancing back briefly to the guard that trailed them, before continuing his way.

As they went, Cam gazed all around him wide eyed, filled with a sudden nostalgia. It was a strange sensation being here. After being confined to the palace for so many years with the only place within he could outside being from the tower, traversing through the streets with this sudden freedom was truly a liberating feeling. Yet it still felt so strange, so foreign to him.

‘I haven’t been out in these streets since...since...’

A memory suddenly flashed within his mind, like a dream made of broken pieces. He remembered a woman who was about his age, with hair as red as the setting sun. He remembered her family, though only vaguely. He remembered having dinner with them. They had known him, as he had once known them. But now...

‘Cam?’ Valery spoke up breaking his thoughts. ‘Are you alright?’

'I'm fine' Cam breathed, furrowing his brow in concentration. 'It's just...there is something I've forgotten. Something I can't quite remember...someone that I used to know.' He shook his head clearing his thoughts. 'It doesn't matter' he said sighing. 'Just forget it.'

Valery's attention lingered on him a moment longer.

'Look' she mumbled, pointing down the street. 'Do you see that?'

Cam looked down the street, though he could not see to what she was indicating.

'What is it?'

'Right there' she said in a hushed voice. 'That man.'

Through the hustle of bodies, Cam saw a young man who looked to be perhaps a little younger than him. His clothes looked as if they had once been fine, but it was clear at a glance he had been wearing these same clothes for several days if not weeks, and sleeping in them too. He was pale, there were bags under his eyes and he looked severely underweight.

As Cam and Valery stood and watched him, they saw his listlessness. This was a man who had nowhere to be. He simply sat upon the steps of one of the buildings, dirt was ground into his clothes and flecked his face and hands, and his long hair was tied back, though even at this distance it could be seen that it was very greasy. And as Cam gazed into his vacant expression, he saw something there that he knew well.

It was hopelessness.

This man was simply waiting to die.

'A beggar?' Cam voiced. 'A vagrant?'

'No' Valery shook her head. 'Look at his clothes...those jewels around his neck...those rings. That man came from a wealthy background.' She paused. 'How did he get here I wonder?'

She took a step forwards.

'Wait' Cam hissed. 'Where are you going?'

'To speak to him' Valery replied pausing.

'But why?'

'I want to find out his story.'

'But' Cam began, shoulders hunched and balling his fists.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'I don't...trust strangers' Cam finished shortly.

'You're a king' Valery reminded. 'Most of the people you're supposed to meet will be strangers. And besides' she indicated with a nod towards the bored looking guard who accompanied them. 'We've got protection.'

Cam glanced back at the quiet soldier as Valery moved forwards again, through the crowd towards the man. Cam followed her, doing so reluctantly.

The man looked up as Valery and Cam approached.

'Hello' Valery spoke gently, kneeling before him and coming to his level.

The man looked momentarily confused. He glanced from Valery to Cam who stood behind her, then back again.

'Royalty?' he asked in a husky voice.

'Yes' Valery nodded. 'This is Cameron' she said turning back to him, 'your king, and I' she said looking back to the man, 'I am to be his queen.'

'Oh' the man spoke in a bored voice. He hardly seemed interested.

‘What is your name?’ Valery asked him.

The man raised his head slightly, tilting his chin back and resting against the wall behind him. ‘Godfrey’ the man replied. ‘My father was a lord, my mother...a lady...my brothers...successful businessmen.’

‘And yourself?’

Godfrey blinked slowly.

‘I....’ Godfrey sighed, ‘I....’ he let out another slow breath, staring up at the passing clouds above. ‘I was to marry...the most beautiful woman....’ He fell silent. Valery and Cam did not speak, simply waiting for him to continue. ‘My life was perfect...’ he groaned. ‘My family was happy.....I was happy.....I.....was supposed to marry *her*.’

‘What happened?’ Valery asked him tenderly.

‘The holy men found out’ Godfrey spoke flatly. ‘They found out. They killed her. They killed our.....our....’ He drew a sharp and shuddering breath between gritted teeth as his eyes began to shimmer. ‘They killed her entire family....’ he whispered, as tears ran down his cheeks, ‘and mine....just for being associated with her. I...escaped...only by pure chance.’ He buried his face in his hands, sobbing hysterically now. The next words he spoke could only just about be understood.

‘I wish this had never happened! Why? Why did this have to happen?! It’s just too cruel...’ he bit into his knuckle then, so hard that he began to bleed. ‘I should have died too’ he hissed, speaking to himself. ‘I should have died too...’

‘I don’t understand’ Valery said. ‘Why would the holy men kill her?’

Godfrey raised his head, falling silent and meeting her gaze.

‘She was a gypsy.’

‘I don’t understand’ Valery was saying as they walked away. ‘Why would the church do that to someone for simply being a gypsy?’

Cam slowed to a stop, staring after her as Valery walked ahead. She paused, glancing back when she realised that Cam was not following.

‘They are bad because they are different from us.’

‘What?’

‘Gypsies’ Cam went on, ‘they don’t follow our laws or traditions. They worship other gods and their women flaunt their bodies. They are selfish and dishonest and...and....’

‘And?’ Valery spoke slowly, narrowing her eyes.

‘They’re just...vagrants...’ Cam finished. ‘They don’t belong anywhere.’

‘How can you say that?’

Cam blinked at her, surprised by her reaction.

Valery pursed her lips, taking a slow and steady breath.

‘You would condemn an entire race of people for the way they live?’

Cam went quiet, feeling suddenly uncertain under her scrutiny.

‘Gypsies are born into their way of life’ Valery said to him. ‘It is wrong for anyone to tell others how they should live their lives, and to condemn someone for choosing a life that is different than their own is just wrong.’

Valery turned away, standing with her back to Cam now.

‘Would you wish pain and hardship onto me if I were born a gypsy?’ she asked him.

‘No’ Cam answered hastily. ‘Of course not.’

‘You only say that because you know me’ Valery said turning back to him. ‘How can you say that all gypsies are bad, that they are selfish and dishonest?’

‘Because...’ Cam answered weakly, his heart beginning to quicken slightly, ‘that’s what...I’ve always been told.’

‘People have fought wars over lies’ Valery told him quietly. ‘People have died for things they *think* they know. If you’ve never met a gypsy, then you know nothing about them. Disregard what other people say about *other* people. Act on what you *know*.’

‘Those are’ Cam spoke slowly, ‘...very wise words...from one so young.’

Valery smiled slyly at him, dipping her head.

‘My father taught me well’ she said. ‘Despite his cruelty, the lessons he taught me were valuable ones. I cannot bring myself to hate him like I used to...not now anyway.’

Valery patted the skirt of her dress flat, straightening up again.

‘What sort of lessons’ she began in a quiet voice, ‘were you taught then?’

‘I was taught to obey’ Cam replied. ‘I was taught...that the seven gods we worship are our mothers and fathers, and that we cannot live without them, we cannot exist without them. Without Ezla, Faeroe, Filis, Kachi, Ludus, Micro and Zeana, our lives would be meaningless.’

‘You think you have no purpose without your religion?’ Valery asked him curiously.

‘Of course. Where would any of us be without it? The world is filled with the dead and dying, the world is filled with hate, corruption and betrayal. The gods execute righteousness and justice, through the holy men, we hear their voice.’

Valery did not interrupt Cam as he spoke.

‘There are those who are different, those who wish to harm the perfect world we are trying to create’ Cam went on. ‘There are those who are different who wish to harm our good way of life. Heathens like these who don’t conform deserve only to burn on the pyres together. Those who are different deserve to die, because they are harming us.’

‘Is that what the holy men taught you?’

‘I believe in karma’ Cam finished, ‘that people deserve what they get, and that justice is dealt fairly by those in charge.’

Valery was silent for a moment, absorbing Cam’s words, deep in thought.

‘So you believe’ she began slowly, ‘that Godfrey has gotten what he deserves?’

‘If he is being punished’ Cam replied, ‘then he is guilty.’

‘Then your father deserved to die also.’

Cam was suddenly taken aback.

‘No’ he answered hastily. ‘No my father was a good man.’

‘But he died’ Valery answered. ‘By your thoughts he deserved it somehow.’

‘No’ Cam whispered feebly, staring at the floor now, ‘...that’s not what I meant.’

‘Karma is a horrible thing’ Valery spoke sadly. ‘Karma says that if a person is murdered...then they deserved it... are you truly telling that you believe karma is a good thing?’

‘I...’ Cam fumbled. ‘I don’t...’

‘Take my hand’ Valery said, reaching out to him. ‘Let us keep walking together.’

Cam did so, walking hand in hand they made their way forwards through the streets, Cam was suddenly haunted by what she had said.

My father didn't deserve to die. He didn't. He was a good man. I know he was...

'Are you alright Cam?'

Cam glanced sideways to Valery then, realising she had been watching him.

'Oh' he said hastily. 'Yes...I mean...I'm fine.'

'Let's go that way' Valery spoke quietly, pointing down one way.

Cam looked to where she pointed, seeing a narrow alleyway that led to a dark road.

He hesitated.

'Might I suggest' the guard that trailed after them spoke politely, 'continuing along this main road?'

Cam and Valery looked ahead to the bright and clear road before them. The people moved hurriedly as they went about their business. These people were what Cam knew to be the middle class, the 'average' men and women of the city. Neither rich nor poor, most had decent jobs, the fathers would care for their families and the mothers would raise their children. They led good lives. And they were happy.

'No' Valery spoke harshly to the soldier. 'I want to see the worst of this city. I must know what it wrong in this place, only then can I make it better.'

Cam dipped his head silently.

'As you wish my lady' the soldier bowed when Cam did not speak. 'I will of course follow you wherever you go' he said.

'Good' Valery replied curtly. She glanced up at Cam. 'Are you ready?'

He looked down to her.

Valery took a step forwards, moving off the path of the main road and down the narrow and dark alley. Within seconds, it seemed almost as if they had stepped into another city entirely. While Cam had come to know of the darker parts of the city in his younger days wandering it, the memory had become lost to him, and he viewed it in a different perspective now that he had grown.

'Where are we?' Valery asked quietly.

'We are in the part of the city known as the Thieves Road' the guard grumbled behind her. 'There are many paths like this that branch throughout the entire city' he explained. 'They are escape routes for thieves and criminals. When the previous king was alive they were sealed off. But as the years passed, one by one more paths like this have opened.' The soldier drew a slow breath. 'It's where those who have lost everything, those that are unwanted by the rest of the world go.' He looked down at his feet. 'It is the city's dumping ground for the unwanted, those that have a place nowhere else. This is where they stay; this is what it has become.'

Cam watched the soldier speak with wide eyes, before turning away again, his heart hammering in his chest.

The path before them was narrow, the buildings so tall the sun could not reach, and the walls either side of them, and the stone at their feet too was covered in black, a sort of fungus that was slowly eating away at the wood and stone. It was damp here, and cold, all of the windows that they could see were misted over, the interior of the buildings completely dark.

To their side before the three, hugging the dead and rotting bodies of several adult figures, where children. Their skin was patsy and their eyes sunken.

‘Many die of exposure’ the guard voice, noticing their attention fixed on this gruesome scene. ‘The nights out here are cold.’

Valery wrinkled her nose, lifting a sleeve to cover her mouth.

‘How can this happen?’ Cam asked looking back at the soldier. ‘How can anyone die like that in a city this prosperous?’

‘Because’ the guard answered simply, ‘they are unwanted by everyone. No home. No food, and the nights are cold.’

‘But...’ Cam said weakly. ‘The children...?’

‘There are many reasons why families are rejected’ the guard replied. ‘The children are usually fortunate enough to live in better homes for longer, simply because they are children. But in the end, even they are left out in the cold, by those they thought would care for them...I’ve seen this many times before. They are the last to be kicked out into the street, but the first to die. Even babies I’ve seen dead and rotting.’

‘This is...’ Cam uttered, in a voice barely audible, ‘...so wrong...’

I remember the suffering of the people years ago...but it was nothing like this...

‘How could this happen?’ Cam asked.

‘It’s in these parts of the city that the rats thrive’ the soldier continued in a bored tone, looking down at the open ribcage of the man below him, where the flies were eating and laying their eggs. ‘They won’t stay here long’ the soldier said. ‘In a few days, even the bones will be gone.’

Cam turned then and was suddenly violently sick, body hunched over and trembling.

Valery stared at him, reaching forwards to touch him. She stopped suddenly, instead drawing back.

Cam retched, throwing up the entire contents of his stomach.

He wiped his mouth with the back of a hand, using the wall for support as he gingerly straightened up. But he did not turn to face the others, not yet.

‘This is just the entrance’ the guard said to them. ‘It gets worse the deeper you go.’

‘How could it get worse than this?’ Valery asked sadly turning to him.

‘All the most horrible things you could imagine, all of which are illegal. If any *normal* person where to see...they would be horrified to say the least. The things that happen down there...’ the soldier jerked his chin down the narrow alley, ‘...if you saw...it would haunt you for years.’

‘Have *you* seen?’ Valery asked him, reluctant to hear the answer. ‘Does it haunt *you* for years?’

‘Yes’ the guard mumbled. ‘Horrible things’ he droned, eyes suddenly distant. ‘Just...horrible....’

‘Like what?’

The soldier looked down at the young princess.

‘Tell me’ Valery ordered him. ‘I am to be queen one day; I must know what is going on in this city...no matter how horrid. I have to be strong.’

The guard took a death breath, before speaking again.

‘Children as young babies prostituted. So called games where unwanted and stray animals are tortured for fun, flayed alive, set on fire, put against each other to fight to the death. Bets are taken on these games, the winners make huge sums of money which they spend on drugs that turn them into...something that cannot be called human anymore. In some of the worse cases I’ve seen people turn to cannibalism, not because they have to, but because they *want* to. They enjoy the things they do.’ The soldier paused in thought. ‘Rape is common place, but in a lot of cases the women are worse than the men. I saw a woman once wearing the skin of her murdered husband around her shoulders like a shawl....’

‘Enough!’ Cam snapped. ‘I don’t want to hear any more!’

The soldier quickly closed his mouth.

‘I cannot go in there...I won’t....’ Cam spoke loudly. ‘I cannot see those things...it’s too cruel’ he finished weakly.

‘Look at them’ Valery spoke quietly to Cam. ‘Look at all these people who suffer, here in the darkest corners of the city where no one sees or cares.’ She paused. ‘Do they...deserve this punishment?’

Cam began to sob then, covering his face with his hands.

‘....I want to go back’ Cam said, his voice trembling. ‘I want to see Godfrey again.’

But when they retraced their steps and found him again, they saw that he was already dead.

That night, Cam would not speak to her.

‘Cam?’ Valery said, her voice wavering. ‘Please please speak to me. Please! I can take no more of this.’

‘My father didn’t deserve to die’ Cam moaned, breaking his silence at last. ‘He didn’t...he *didn’t* he was *good*...’

Valery crawled onto the bed where Cam lay on his side with his back to her. She reached out to touch his shoulder, and he rolled over, gazing with bloodshot eyes back at her.

‘How could you not know that any of this was happening?’ she asked him.

‘I don’t know’ Cam sobbed, hand going to cover his eyes as his whole body began to tremble again. ‘I don’t know...I didn’t know.....nobody told me...I swear to the gods that I had no idea!’

Valery grabbed his hand, holding it tightly in her own.

‘When I am queen, I am going to put a stop to all of this!’

‘How could the council not know about this?’ Cam whispered. ‘Ever since my father died...it has gotten worse. How...how could they not know?’

‘Of course they know’ Valery spoke sharply. ‘Of course they do. They just don’t care. Don’t you see? They’ve been lying to you all this time.’

Tears rolled down Cam’s cheeks.

‘Cam’ Valery spoke firmly. ‘We *will* make this better...together.’

Cam sat up suddenly, embracing her tightly as he cried into her shoulder.

Far away, in another kingdom entirely, a man named Pedro was strolling along the deck of a ship, humming merrily to himself. All around him the sailors were busy tending to the ship, and merchants were hollering to one another, as their goods were carried onto the ship and hidden away within its belly.

‘Such a fine day it is to sail’ Pedro declared, speaking to no one in particular. ‘Such a fine day indeed.’

He came to the head of the ship, standing there in the strong breeze with his hands behind his back, bobbing on the balls of his feet.

‘I feel today will be a very good day.’

It was at that very moment that a young man, only about sixteen in age, came rushing across the deck and towards him.

Pedro gave him a very peculiar look as the young man stopped before him, huffing and puffing, catching his breath again.

‘I’m sorry to bother you sir’ the young man said bowing low, ‘but I have an important message for you.’

‘Indeed’ Pedro said frowning down at him as he took the folded parchment the young man offered to him.

He looked down at it, recognising the wax seal upon it.

‘This is from the palace’ he spoke slowly, glancing up at the young man. ‘Who sent you?’

‘The prince Luke’ the messenger replied. ‘He said it was urgent. I rode here as fast as I could...I’m just glad I caught you in time.’

‘As a matter of fact I was just about to leave’ Pedro replied, breaking the wax seal and opening the parchment. ‘You were most fortunate indeed to catch me in time.’

He fell silent for a moment as he read the letter. A dark expression crossed his face, and he closed the parchment, letting his hand fall to his side.

‘Oh’ he mumbled softly.

‘Is everything alright sir?’

‘That question is rather difficult to answer if I’m being honest’ Pedro replied. ‘My good friend Fulcrim has died. There are suspicions that he was poisoned...and that the council are behind his death.’

‘Sir?’

Pedro’s eyes flashed suddenly, and he grabbed the messenger by the shoulders roughly.

‘You must not repeat what I have just said. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘I take it you were chosen to bear this message because you are trustworthy?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Good.’ Pedro released him, turning from him and swiftly tearing up the parchment into many little pieces, before tossing the shreds into the sea below. ‘You must return to the palace as fast as possible’ Pedro told the messenger, ‘and say to the prince Luke, that I am on my way. It has been a fortunate day indeed. Five more minutes and you would have been unable to reach me.’

‘Where were you going sir?’ the messenger asked.

‘I have been banished by the council for crimes that are not of my own. But receiving that letter was a pardon. The council have no authority over the prince’s word, at least not in

regard to this. Luke is not king, but he still holds at least some power. When I return to the capital and speak to him, my name will be cleared, and I will be able to see my family again.’ Pedro turned then to face the wide open sea, beyond which many hundreds of miles away, was a desolate land where he was sentenced to spend the rest of his days, alone with his books, until he died, but no more.

‘A most fortunate day indeed’ Pedro muttered under his breath. ‘Now hurry’ he spoke clearly to the messenger. ‘Return to the prince, and tell him I am on my way!’

The messenger bowed and swiftly left. Pedro turned and spoke to one of the sailor hands, one of the many men that were loading the ships with all its supplies.

‘You there!’ Pedro barked. ‘Come below deck with me, I need to fetch my books and all my belongings.’

‘You are not sailing with us?’ the servant enquired.

Pedro threw back his travelling cloak, revealing beneath the white clothes and blue sash worn by the holy figures within this kingdom.

‘No I do not travel with you’ Pedro replied. ‘Not on this day. I must return to the capital, and marry the king and his princess.’

It was many days later that the messenger returned to the palace. Traversing the many stairs, he found Luke in one of the higher rooms, leaning forwards upon the balcony, gazing down at the city before him and deep in thought.

‘Your majesty.’

Luke straightened and turned to face the messenger silently.

‘I bring good news’ the messenger spoke with a gasp. ‘Pedro is on his way.’

Luke let out a deep sigh, his face cracking into a wide smile. ‘Thank the gods’ he sighed. ‘My brother and Valery will be married soon, then the dreadful council will....’ He broke off.

‘When does he arrive?’

‘Within the week’ the messenger replied. ‘He is on his way here right now.’

Luke pursed his lips, scratching his palms nervously.

Hang in there Cam he thought to himself. *Just for a little longer...*

Valery approached the steps, marching swiftly up the stairs and down the corridor, entering the room she shared with Cam. She found her handmaiden Plum waiting by the door.

‘How is he?’ Valery asked quietly.

‘He’s no better’ Plum answered quickly.

Valery frowned, turning to face the bed where Cam lay on his side. For the last few days he had sunken into deep depression, from which Valery could not pull him from, though she had tried.

She approached the bed then, and sat on the edge beside him, staring down at him.

‘I’m sorry’ she sighed miserably. ‘I’m sorry I have done this to you. But you had to see...’

‘I can’t...’ Cam whispered. ‘I just can’t do this...I don’t want to be king....I don’t want the responsibility.....this world.....’ His body began to quiver, body tense as he balled his fists, ‘it’s just too cruel...’

Valery stared down at him. She lingered here for a moment, reluctant to leave, but in the end, there was nothing she could do.

Cam didn't even notice her go.

The door closed, and he was alone again, left in the utter silence. Here he stayed, until at long last a figure came to visit him.

Cam sat up, staring in only mild surprise at the plague masked figure before him.

'Hello Cam' the figure spoke in a female voice. 'My name is Callista.'

Cam stared back at the tall figure standing there.

'Why do I keep seeing figures like you?' he mumbled, speaking almost as if to himself. 'Are you even real?'

'I assure you' the figure named Callista replied, leaning forward and touching his shoulder firmly, 'that I am real.'

Cam blinked slowly at her.

'I know it's hard for you. You've had a difficult life...I know.'

Cam didn't answer.

'You must help your people' Callista urged. 'They need you. Do not hide from others suffering.' She smiled behind her mask. 'You have the power to make life better for everyone. Did you think being king was easy? Do you think it was easy for your father?'

Cam raised his head slowly, staring intently at this strange figure.

'He died because he was weak' she said to him. 'Do you want the same thing to happen to you?'

'No' Cam answered quietly. 'But...I miss him so much...even after all these years it still hurts....'

Tears brimmed in his eyes.

'I know' Callista answered softly, 'I know you miss him.' She straightened then, looking away. 'You could die' she said, 'if you wanted. You could be with him again. There are so many ways.'

Cam tensed slightly, not clearly understanding what she meant.

'Whatever afterlife you believe in' Callista went on, 'he may be there for you...waiting. You could see him again...if you wanted.' She placed an object on his lap. 'You could see him' Callista repeated. 'Right *now*.'

Cam stared bleary down at the shining blade of the knife before him.

'It would only take a moment' Callista teased, 'and you could be with him again, could hold him, hear his voice, see his smile...like when you were a child. Remember how full of life he was and how much he loved both his boys?'

Cam stared down at the knife unmoving, his mind a haze.

'You could die for the memory of those you've loved and lost' Callista said, '...or you could stay with the living, and fight for a better life. It won't be easy...but it could be worth it.'

Callista paused then. 'Tell me...do you love Valery?'

'Yes' Cam mumbled after a time. 'In my own way.'

'Would you protect her if you could?'

'Yes.'

Callista leant forward, coming to his level.

'Brioke wishes to harm her' she whispered. 'He will succeed...if you do not protect her, then he will kill her. He wants to continue abusing you, controlling you as he has been doing. But

Valery is getting in the way, and he hates her for it.' Callista smiled again behind her mask. 'Do you want to continue being nothing more than a vassal? A shadow king?' Can stared down at the knife on his lap, his breath caught in his throat. 'See your father' Callista said, 'or save Valery. What's it to be?' Cam met the stranger's eyes, before glancing down at the knife one last time. He rose to his feet, making his way to the door, the knife the masked figure had placed on his lap clattered to the floor. 'There's a good lad' Callista spoke to the empty room once he had gone. 'I knew' she said, 'I knew you would make the right choice.' She smiled, before turning and walking away, vanishing into thin air, leaving the knife where it lay.

Outside in the corridor, Cam caught up to Valery. 'Valery wait!' She turned, surprised to see him there. 'Cam...' she uttered, 'what...?' 'I'm sorry' Cam blurted, slowing to a stop before her. 'I'm sorry I...I lost myself. This isn't who I am. I want to be a good king. I want to be strong but...' 'I know' Valery whispered, reaching out and taking his hand. 'It isn't easy. But it will be better now...because we are *together*.' Cam smiled gently at her, feeling his stomach lift. A tear trickled down his cheek, and he stepped forward, holding Valery firmly in a warm embrace. 'I want to be a good king' Cam said, 'like my father was.' Valery held onto his arms, pushing him back slowly. 'I have news from your brother' Valery told him. 'Luke says there is a holy man on his way here to marry us' she said to him. 'He will be here in only a few days.' Cam's heart skipped a beat at hearing this, his stomach tightened a little. But then he smiled. 'Good' he said, 'I'm glad. I look forward to the day we are married.' 'You do?' Valery asked, sounding surprised. 'Of course' Cam nodded. 'I will try my best to be a good king, and a good husband...and a good father.' Valery smiled at this, behind her Plum was smiling too, and above, hidden from view, the masked figure called Callista watched silently.

Miranda stood at the far end of the corridor, leaning against the wall with her arms folded, she watched as Cam and Valery walked away together, hand in hand. She smiled. 'I think...' she spoke slowly, '...that things are going to be ok now.' 'You think the king can handle it?' the mercenary masquerading as her servant asked. 'Yes' Miranda spoke with surety. 'I do.' She paused. 'Look at them' she whispered as Cam and Valery walked away, closely followed by the handmaiden Plum. 'I think they will make

a wonderful couple. She brings out the best in him' Miranda said, watching as her son rounded the corner out of sight.

She sighed then, pushing herself off the wall and straightening, she turned to the man beside her.

'How did he fare the other day when he visited the darker parts of the city?'

'It was a shock for him I think' the man replied grimly, 'but I think he will come around.'

'Yes.' Miranda glanced over her shoulder in the direction her son had gone. 'I think he is beginning to realise what it truly means to be king' she said, 'as his father did before him. It's all part of the process.'

'Do you wish for us to continue to watch over him?' the mercenary asked.

'Of course' Miranda said. 'Look after him. Protect him. Never let him out of your sight, even after the holy man Pedro finally arrives here and they are married, even years after that.' Miranda paused then, frowning to herself. 'All our lives are in danger' she mumbled, 'every day until we die.' She bit her lip, glaring at the ground beneath her feet. 'Nothing lives forever, and in the end, everything dies...'

It was later that day, when Valery encouraged Cam to have his own audience, and speak directly with his people, and listen to their worries.

'Are you sure about this?' Cam asked Valery again as she sat on the smaller throne beside his larger one.

'I know it's hard' she whispered hurriedly back. 'It's always hardest first time. Trust me, it will get easier. *Trust me.*'

Cam straightened, sitting back in his throne. He ground his teeth nervously. People were already lining up outside the door. They were coming to the palace to see him, and Cam waited for the first man to walk through the door.

'Let him enter' Cam spoke firmly, sounding braver than he felt.

The soldier in the room moved to open the door, and the first man stepped forward, head bowed before the king.

'Your majesty' the man bowed low. 'I thank you graciously for seeing me today.'

'Speak' Valery spoke up beside Cam. 'What do you wish to say?'

The man glanced up. He straightened, standing tall now, and addressed the king.

'Your majesty' the humble man spoke clearly. 'Here is why I have come to you today.'

Hours and hours passed, and the sun had already set by the time Cam dismissed the last person.

He sat in his throne, resting on an elbow with his head in his hand.

'That was horrible' he rasped.

'Bring some water' Valery said to her handmaiden who stood behind them.

Plum bowed submissively, before hurrying off to comply. Around them the soldiers were also filing out, having managed the people who had come to visit, there was only Cam and Valery left now.

Valery rose from her seat, kneeling on the floor before Cam and taking his hand in hers.

'You've done very well' she whispered to him. 'I am very proud.'

Cam smiled weakly at her, feeling utterly exhausted.

'I.....I think I need to sleep.'

Cam rose from his seat gingerly, moving carefully down the steps. Valery walked with him, as they headed together back to their room. When they reached their bedroom, Plum had caught them up. She followed them into the room, carrying a silver tray with two glasses and a jug of water. Valery took one of these glasses and filled it, offering it to Cam who took it graciously. She poured her own glass as Cam drained his, going over to the bed and lying down.

‘Thank you Plum’ Valery mumbled.

‘Is there anything else I can get for you?’ the handmaiden asked.

‘No’ Valery replied, ‘nothing for the moment.’

Plum bowed, retreating from the room. Once she had gone, Valery turned to Cam.

When she approached him on the bed, she saw that he was already fast asleep.

‘Poor thing’ Valery sighed quietly. ‘You’ve had a very difficult day, but it will get easier.’

She leant forward, kissing him on the cheek.

‘Sleep peacefully’ she whispered to him, before dressing into her nightdress and joining him on the bed.

She too was asleep shortly after.

Interlude start

Reuben moved forwards slowly through the tall grass. The birds were singing in the trees all around him, calling to one another in their sweet songs.

It was early morning, and the sun was blinking through the branches that waved in the breeze. It was beautiful in the world around him, but Reuben paid no attention to any of this. His mind was on other things. He was focused as he made his way onwards. For hours he walked this thriving world, but at last, he left the boundary of the trees.

Reuben stood there, clinging to the foliage, gazing out at the open land before him.

Reuben blinked slowly. Before him the land had been cleared of trees. Before him, the land was open. From this point he stood, Reuben could see a small town, grey in comparison to the rest of this world.

Reuben smiled. It took a lot of effort; his skin was coarse and cracked, resembling more like tree bark than human flesh. Reuben balled his fists, his knuckles cracked as he did so. His eyes shone like stars, the pupils vertical slits, like a cats.

Reuben glanced back into the forest behind him, seeing a glimpse of Love. She lingered in the trees, too afraid to stand out in the open, too afraid, now that they were near the town, the town where people gathered in number.

The humans terrified her, as they terrified almost all of the creatures that lived in this forest. But not Reuben. Reuben had been born into a world that was filled with people. His early life had been spent living in a modern town, and he was once just like they were. But now he had changed.

Reuben nodded towards Love, before she slipped out of view, hiding herself away. He faced ahead again.

Reuben took a step forward, out into the open where Love would not follow. He walked the path towards the town, crossing the border and entering the town itself. He ignored the strange looks the townsfolk were giving him as he went by. Reuben knew where he was going, he knew who he had to find, and when he found him, the young man was just as surprised to see him as everyone else around them.

Reuben smiled with great effort at the young man, his eyes wide and vibrant.

The young man stared back uncertainly.

Lucas watched the screen intently, doing so from his own world. He saw as Reuben opened his mouth, and spoke to the young man.

‘What's he doing?’

Lucas glanced up to the masked figure that had spoken.

Isami removed her plague mask, smiling at Lucas.

‘You're watching Reuben?’ she asked.

Lucas turned away from her, looking to the screen again.

‘Yeah’ he grumbled. ‘I am.’

Isami sauntered up to him, taking him by the arm.

Together they stood, watching the screen.

‘What is he doing?’ she asked again.

‘He’s looking for his replacement.’

‘He’s leaving?’ she asked curiously.

‘Yes’ Lucas spoke quietly. ‘He’s fallen in love with this creature....this...earth elemental...’

Isami watched him closely, before looking back at the screen.

‘You're not ready to let him go’ Isami spoke slowly. ‘Are you?’

‘No’ Lucas murmured under his breath. ‘I'm not.’

Interlude end

It was still early morning, and Valery and Plum were sitting on the corridor floor playing games.

‘My turn’ Valery sang, holding the metal piece in her hands, a piece which was painted several different colours. ‘If I land on red, I win this round.’

Plum smiled at her, lying on her front with her chin resting on her folded hands, before her lay several more metal pieces painted many colours, and one painted a single colour, purple. Alongside these pieces were several large red die, and a flat piece of card painted silver.

‘Go ahead’ Plum teased. ‘You know red is the hardest colour to get.’

Valery stuck her tongue out at Plum, lifting her hand getting ready to throw the metal piece. 'Ok' Valery whispered, frowning in concentration. 'Here I go...'

She paused then as a shadow fell over her, glancing around she saw Cam standing behind her. 'You're awake' she said. 'Are you feeling better today?'

Cam smiled down at her, grinning widely.

'Yes' he sighed. 'I feel better today. In fact I feel better than better. I feel great!'

'Hu?'

Cam knelt suddenly, reaching forwards and embracing Valery tightly.

'Thank you' he whispered into her ear. 'Thank you for everything you have done for me.'

Valery blinked in shock as Cam held her. Her body relaxed slightly, and her arms lifted, holding him back.

'I'm doing everything I can for you' she said to him. 'After all, we are to be married soon.'

'And for that day' Cam whispered to her, '...I cannot wait.'

He smiled again, before slowly releasing her and leaning back, gazing into her face.

'I want to go outside.'

'What?'

'I want to go outside' Cam repeated happily.

She stared at him for several moments, before breaking into a smile.

'Alright' she sighed. 'Let's go right now.'

She let the metal piece she was holding fall from her hand, leaving the game where it lay, she rose with Cam. Hand in hand, they walked down the corridor, followed a step behind by the silent Plum, who was smiling to herself as she followed after them.

It made her very happy to see Valery happy, and Cam also.

Things are going well the handmaiden thought to herself. *Things are going very well.*

Cam and Valery walked hand in hand through the city streets beyond the home they shared. The palace could be seen from any point within the city, it was so tall, reaching nearly to the clouds in its magnificent structure.

Cam squeezed Valery's hand suddenly, feeling butterflies in his stomach.

'Your arrival is the best thing that's ever happened to me' he said to her, speaking his thoughts hastily before he had time to hesitate. 'It feels as if a great weight has been lifted off my shoulders, a weight that has been there for so long, I didn't even realise that it existed.'

She glanced back to him, smiling in turn, before looking away again.

'Look at it' she said, gazing at the street about them at the people who bustled by. The mothers and their children, the rich merchants selling their wares at a stall, the holy group of men preaching on the street corner, the vagrant begging for scraps in the doorway of an abandoned home. 'This' Valery began, 'this is our world, and together, we will work hard to make it better for everyone, together we will work hard to make it stronger.' She smiled to herself. 'Everyone' she said, 'everyone will be treated fairly, whether they are rich or poor. I want to help rule a world I would enjoy living in, no matter who I was.'

Cam looked down to her.

'Create a world in which you do not know who you will be' Valery said to him. 'A world that is fair for everyone. A world that is just. That is the world my father tried to create in his own

kingdom. That is the kind of world I want to create also, the kind of home I would want to live.'

'As would I' Cam sighed, 'as would I.'

They walked through the city streets, simply wandering and looking around, until Cam noticed something. A man dressed as a palace guard. His gaze lingered on them a little too long.

Cam noticed the flash of steel, quick enough to pull Valery out the way as the man made a lunge for her.

Valery stumbled, hand going to her neck where he had cut her, feeling just the tiniest sliver of blood against her fingers.

She turned to the man that had attacked her, staring wide eyed as Cam held her in his arms, he was suddenly tense, suddenly terrified.

'That was sloppy' Valery uttered, before the man took a step towards them.

Cam and Valery both noticed suddenly that they were alone. There were no civilians wandering about as there had been before, and they were surrounded by more of the men dressed the same. They guarded each escape route, trapping Cam and Valery where they were.

'Step away from the princess' the first man ordered. 'It's her we want.'

Cam could not speak. He only stared back in horror.

They want to kill her! He realised. *Who sent them?*

'We're not here to hurt you' the man said again to Cam. 'Hand over the princess, or we kill both of you.'

He's bluffing Cam thought desperately as panic gripped within. *He has to be.*

The man advanced towards them, taking a slow and deliberate step. Cam drew sharply back, holding Valery tighter to him, when the man suddenly fell.

Cam blinked in shock, seeing a bolt sticking out of the man's back.

It was then he realised, that the men on the ground around them had fallen too. The same bolts sticking out of their bodies, shot with precision and protruding from their armour.

He had been so fixated on the man that had spoken, that he had not noticed what happened around them.

Cam glanced up, seeing on the rooftops around them more soldiers, these dressed in dark colours, with shabby cloaks and hoods raised.

Cam and Valery stared up in fear at the Bowman that had killed the soldier that had spoken to them, relaxing only when he lowered his weapon, bowing low to them in respect.

'It's one of your mother's men' Valery hissed. 'It has to be.'

'They've been following us this whole time?' Cam uttered.

'What she said then must be true' Valery glared. 'They were loyal to your father, and loyal to *you* now. This is it' she said turning to Cam. 'For their sake, as well as everyone else's, you have to prove you are worthy of their loyalty, prove that you are strong.'

She pushed him away sharply, breaking from his hold and marching towards the man that had cut her, lifting a brick lying on the street nearby as she did.

She stood over him, lifting the heavy brick in both hands and bringing it crashing down on his head with all the force she could muster. Then she picked it up and hit him again, and

again and again, until there was left nothing but a bloody pulp, a mass of blood and flesh and bone that was barely recognisable as a face anymore.

‘I will not be weak’ she spoke defiantly, throwing the bloodied brick away. ‘I will not be swayed by fear. Anyone who tries to cause harm’ she said glaring down at the dead body at her feet, ‘will meet a similar fate. ‘There is no mercy she hissed, ‘for men like these. I wish quash my enemies, like my father did, like the fearless queen I should be!’

‘You’re becoming more like my mother...’ Cam uttered in a distant voice, still shocked at what she had done.

‘Is that a good thing?’ Valery asked turning back to him.

‘I don’t know’ Cam said. ‘She can be cruel...but she is strong.’

Valery tilted her head at him.

‘Only the strong make it in this world’ she said, echoing Miranda’s lessons.

Cam raised his head slightly, surprised to hear her say this.

‘Let’s go home’ she said calmly. ‘I’m getting bored of the streets for today.’

When they entered the main hall of the palace, they found Miranda and Luke waiting for them. The instant they walked through the main doors, Miranda rushed up to them, embracing Valery tightly.

‘I heard what happened’ she breathed, holding Valery tightly. ‘Are you alright?’

‘We’re fine’ Valery said holding Miranda back, ‘we’re both fine.’

Miranda stepped back, gazing into Valery’s face as Luke looked over Cam, nodding to him silently.

‘It’s alright’ Miranda said hastily, letting go of Valery and straightening up again. ‘Things will get better. I know things will get better. Things are changing. I can feel it...’

The following day, Cam’s life would change forever, would take a completely different direction...

...and things will never be the same ever again.

Interlude start

Tam smiled warmly to his family, having embraced each of them in turn.

‘Please’ he spoke to them softly. ‘Please do not be sad. I am going to a different place, a better place, where I can change people’s lives for the better.’

‘Why?’ his little sister Cynthia sobbed. ‘Why did he say that it had to be you?’

‘Because’ Tam said placing a hand upon her head, ‘I am the one he saw fit to choose. I am the best, and I will use this new power I have to make people lives better.’

‘Will you really do such a thing?’ Cynthia asked.

‘Yes’ Tam whispered. ‘I have seen...incredible things...things you could only dream of, things beyond what you could even imagine.’

Cynthia’s eyes grew wide as he said this, and she gazed up at her brother in awe.

‘Will you come back to visit us?’ his teary mother said as she was held by her husband beside her.

‘Of course I will’ Tam replied, straightening up and facing them. ‘I will never forget you. I’ve met each of the eight and they tell me I can live forever...if I change my body to a false one...’

‘False?’ his mother mumbled.

Tam smiled again, blinking slowly. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘No please’ his father said slowly. ‘I want to know everything there is to know.’

‘Well’ Tam sighed wearily, ‘they say there are ways that allow them to live forever, the best being...’ he paused, ‘putting your consciousness inside a clockwork body.’

‘Your consciousness?’ his father echoed.

‘Everything that makes you, you’ Tam replied, ‘all your thoughts, your memories, your desires and wishes. It is you’ he finished. ‘But in a better body. A clockwork body. A body that can be replaced and fixed. Completely undistinguishable from the real thing...until you look inside.’

‘And that will happen to you?’ Cynthia asked him.

‘Yes’ Tam nodded, ‘but not yet. When I am ready. When I start to grow old.’

‘And you assure us’ his mother interjected, clutching her handkerchief tightly in a fist, ‘that you will be completely safe?’

‘Safer than I am now’ Tam replied. ‘I will be stronger. I will be able to wield magic!’

‘Magic’ his father tutted, holding his dear wife close to him. ‘Such a thing I have heard of only in fairy tales.’

‘Well’ Tam nodded slowly, ‘all stories have a streak of truth in them., even the most fabulous ones.’ Tam paused then, turning to the window and gazing out at the world. ‘They say that even here’ he spoke in a distant voice, ‘in the forests, deeper than any man dares to wander, that there is magic, earth elementals, sprites, fairies and elves. Are we really justified to say now that they are all false? Especially...since one came to our front door...’

‘I wish he hadn’t come!’ Cynthia sobbed. ‘It’s because of him that my brother is going away!’

‘Only for the moment’ Tam spoke quickly, trying to sooth her. ‘You like it when I read you stories don’t you?’

Cynthia stared up at her brother with large eyes.

‘Yes’ she breathed. ‘I love that. You tell the most wonderful tales.’

‘And now I will have even better ones when I return.’ Tam knelt before her. ‘I will be able to travel to other worlds, to past and future worlds, magical worlds, alien worlds. Even I, even now, don’t know what I will find.’

‘You’ve always been kind to others’ his father said as Tam rose to his feet again. ‘You’ve never been persuaded by material things...by gold and wealth.’

‘Perhaps that is why the earth elemental chose me’ Tam spoke in a distant voice. ‘Because he knows that I am good.’

‘Will you really make this world better?’ his father asked.

‘Yes’ Tam nodded. ‘This world, and as many others as I can find...for as long as I can live for, even if it’s hard to do so. I will make this entire world as peaceful and agreeable as this little town, where everyone is kind and nothing bad ever happens.’

Tam lifted the object in his hands, staring down at it.

A dark mask with large eyes like windows, and a long pointed beak. A plague mask, like the ones the others wore

‘I am the right one for the task’ Tam mumbled, speaking to the mask he held in both his hands. ‘I will achieve great things...’

He raised his head to glance towards his family, smiling as he did. Tam turned from them, concealing the mask beneath his cloak.

‘I will be back this evening’ he said to them as he made his way to the door. ‘I won’t be gone long. I promise.’

He opened the door, starting back in surprise.

‘Lucas...what are you...?’

Lucas without a pause raised the gun, and shot Tam point blank in the head.

Blood splattered the walls. The family screamed, as they saw Tam fall back dead.

Deep in the forest, within the same world but far away, Reuben woke. Pulling himself from the earth that had grown around him, and turning to Love who lay beside him.

‘Love’ he whispered her name. ‘Love?’

But she was utterly still.

Reuben grabbed her shoulders suddenly, shaking her roughly and calling out her name. But she was completely limp.

Her body would eventually rot away, returning to the earth from whence it came, and the spot where she had died, would sprout the most beautiful flowers, which would last for many moons, until they too withered away.

It was a long time later when Reuben finally returned to the home he knew as Lacklustre Paradise. Here he found his brother waiting for him.

‘She’s dead’ Reuben whispered to him.

‘I know’ Lucas replied. ‘I’m sorry.’

Lucas handed the mask back to Reuben. Reuben stared at it in confusion for a few seconds, before taking it.

‘Welcome home brother’ Lucas said. ‘It’s good to have you back.’

Interlude end

‘The priest will be here?’ Cam uttered.

‘Yes’ Miranda replied, gliding past them. ‘He has reached these shores, and rides to the capital as we speak.....he will arrive sometime soon. Today in fact.’

Cam glanced towards Valery, who was watching him closely, eyes wide with expectation.

‘Today?’ Cam mumbled, feeling suddenly in shock.

‘And tomorrow’ Luke told him, leaning back against the desk with his arms folded, ‘you will be married as quickly as possible. Then perhaps something could be done about this dreadful council.’

Out in the corridor a short time later, when they were alone, Valery turned to Cam, embracing him tightly.

‘What are you...?’

‘I’m just so happy’ Valery interrupted him, voice muffled as she spoke into his clothes, holding him tight. ‘I want to be married. I want to be yours. I want to be the queen instead of just a princess.’

‘You will’ Cam whispered to her, holding her back. ‘You will.’

‘Cam!’ came a sudden and sharp barking call. ‘I want to see you in my office.’

Cam’s heart plummeted sharply in his chest, and he felt a sudden and sharp fear claw its way into him.

Cam turned, eyes wide as he tried to force himself not to tremble, force himself to stay strong, as he stared back at Brioke who stood behind him.

He swallowed the lump in his throat.

‘Is everything alright Cam?’ Valery asked him stepping back.

‘Yes’ he spoke quietly to her, forcing himself to smile. ‘Yes everything’s fine.’

He looked back at Brioke, who stared at him with a stony expression. Even now he dare not defy him.

‘Cam?’ Valery asked him, sounding suddenly nervous.

‘Can you...’ Cam whispered urgently, ‘go back to our room?’

‘What? But why?’ she instantly protested.

‘Just...’ Cam fumbled. ‘Please’ he begged. ‘Everything is alright I promise. I just need you to go back to your room for a minute. I will join you shortly.’

Valery ground her teeth, glancing once towards Brioke, before looking back at Cam.

‘Are you *sure*?’

‘Yes’ Cam hastened. ‘Just go. Please. I’ll be alright I promise.’

Valery stepped away from them both reluctantly. Turning on her heel she marched away, sparing just one last glance back at them, before rounding the corner.

Cam let out the breath he had been holding, glancing hesitantly towards Brioke. Now the two were alone.

‘Come with me’ Brioke ordered, striding away without pause.

Cam scratched his itchy palms, before following after him. Together they walked through the palace with its many stairs, and back to Brioke’s office.

Cam entered the office, and Brioke closed the door behind him.

‘I cannot let you go through with this.’

Cam turned back to Brioke, watching him closely. But he was utterly silent. He held his tongue.

‘You cannot marry that girl. She is a bad influence. She does not act the way a princess should act.’

Brioke moved across the room and over to his drinks cabinet. Reaching for a bottle he began to pour himself some wine.

‘You’ve been lying to me this whole time’ Cam mumbled. ‘You’ve been keeping me in the dark.’

Brioke raised his head slowly, placing the bottle slowly back down.

‘I saw you visit the city’ Brioke told him. ‘I saw you command those guards at the front gates of the palace grounds.’ His brow furrowed in thought. ‘A few suffer for the greater good’ Brioke spoke through a grimace. ‘We’re making this world a better place.’

‘Only for you.’

Brioke fell silent. He turned very slowly to face Cam. Cam had never spoken to Brioke like this before.

‘You tried to kill Valery didn’t you?’

‘She is a liability’ Brioke answered. ‘She’s going to take you away from me.’

‘No’ Cam said, his voice breaking. ‘I will never be yours again. Not ever. After everything you’ve done to me, only now am I breaking free. Only now...because of her...’

‘She cannot stay here. Her presence is destroying everything the council and I have been working so hard to achieve.’

‘I love her’ Cam uttered. ‘I love her...’ He balled his fists then, gripped by a sudden anger. ‘This world is rotten enough’ Cam growled at Brioke, ‘without *rotten* people *like you* making it worse.’ He narrowed his eyes in pure hate. ‘You’ve forced me to turn against my brother’ he said. ‘You force me to hurt him...to push him away...to make me alone.....’

Brioke straightened.

‘You belong to me’ Brioke said menacingly as he approached him. ‘You will do as I say’ he spoke with surety. ‘You always will.’

Cam backed himself against the wall. In his mind Cam counted the steps as Brioke descended upon him, squeezing his eyes tight shut, expecting to feel pain.

Instead Brioke caressed him, leaning forwards and kissing him, moving his lips down his neck as Cam turned his head away.

‘No’ he whispered.

Brioke acted as if he hadn’t heard, grabbing Cam’s wrist with one hand and pinning him against the wall, with the other hand, he moved to touch his groin.

‘This body’ Brioke smiled cruelly, ‘belongs to me. Your body belongs to me...you are *mine*. You *will* always be mine.’

Cam began to tremble as he felt Brioke begin to undo his breeches, enveloped by a sudden wave of anger he tensed, growling and snarling he pushed Brioke away.

‘No!’ he cried. ‘You will not touch me again!’

His memory lapsed.

Cam ran the horse on as fast as it would go. The poor beast was exhausted; its body steaming in the cool day and flanks foaming with sweat, but Cam kicked it harder, running it at high-speed across the land until it stumbled.

Cam was thrown forwards as the horse toppled beneath him, hitting the ground hard and rolling to a stop.

He groaned in pain, hugging his aching body and forcing himself back to his feet without much pause. He stood without too much effort. He wasn’t badly injured, he was lucky. A fall like the one he had just experience could have seriously hurt him, or even killed him. The stallion however was not so lucky.

He moved tentatively back towards the beast, holding his arm to his chest, feeling it throbbing painfully. The stallion was thrashing around on the floor in agony, trying to get up before submitting and laying still, holding its body stiffly. Cam saw at a glance its leg was broken, having landed its foot in a rabbit hole as it ran.

He knew there was nothing he could do, and so he left it there, to suffer its end, heading now on foot onwards to a forest ahead of him, hoping it would give him cover.

Once he dared a glance behind him, heart jolting as he saw in the distance a mass of riders heading his way. They would shortly find his fallen horse, and then find *him*.

Cam sobbed in panic as he picked up his pace, beginning to run now towards the woods before him, all the while glancing back at the riders who were coming closer, riding their horses at a gallop.

Cam would have been easy to spot, a single figure out on the open plains, his long purple cloak trailing after him like a flag to his pursuers.

He reached the edge of the forest, but continued to run, never stopping, not until he was trembling from exhaustion and the stitch in his side had become unbearable.

It was dark around him; the forest he had come to was thick and wild.

Cam reached the head of a waterfall, wheeling around in panic when he heard shouts from behind him. By the sound of it, the men that pursued him had fanned out as if trying to close a net around him.

Cam glanced to his side, where he heard more voices to his left, and to his right.

They were trapping him.

He spun around, looking ahead again at the cliff before him. It was a long drop to the water below, every instinct within his body screamed for him to stop as he stepped closer to the edge.

Cam threw himself forwards without thinking, his stomach balling into tight knots as he plummeted downwards, hitting the water hard. He struggled to the surface, pawing at the water and fighting for air, his clothes now soaked with water weighed him down, his cloak

even more so. But he was a strong swimmer, having swum from an early age with his brother.

Tears ran from his eyes as he remembered Luke, fighting to the surface through the bubbles and rapid water.

No he thought to himself as he fought against the current. *I cannot die! I have to live to see my brother! I have to live! I have to live! I have to live!*

He opened his eyes again, bubbles of air streaming from his mouth as he was slowly running out of breath. His foot found a rock beneath him, and he used it for support, struggling forwards and grasping onto another rock before him, pulling himself to the surface.

He finally broke the water, gasping a deep lungful of air, stumbling forwards onto solid land to sit on his knees, half in half out of the water, moaning and groaning and wheezing as pain and shock and adrenaline coursed through his body.

He glanced around him fearfully, his wet black hair sticking to his cheek and forehead as he looked towards the waterfall behind him, seeing a man on horseback staring down at him from above. Another joined him, then another, their eyes all fixed upon him.

Cam shrank under their stares, feeling suddenly so exposed. He rose to his feet to flee, jerked back suddenly as his cloak caught on a rock behind him.

He turned around, trying to pull it, failing, he simply unclasped it from around his neck, and left it where it lay, disappearing into the woods again.

Cam realised he was at last free of the palace.

But he never thought it would happen like this.

Chapter Thirteen

Hours later he had left the woods, wandering alone across the open road, having lost his pursuers, at least for the meantime. The sun above shone brightly and had dried his clothes. He roamed the open lands now; heading in no particular direction, only away from the palace, the place he had called home, the only place he had ever really known.

How he hated it.

Cam stopped suddenly, burying his face in his hands. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know where he was going; he knew almost nothing about the world outside the palace, having never travelled further than the city which surrounded his home.

Feeling so desperately lost and alone he began to cry, body hunched over and sobbing, slowly running his hands down his face.

He drew a sudden sharp intake of breath, staring down at his hands in shock.

His skin had begun to glow.

Cam forgot his sorrows for a moment, staring at himself, first to one hand, then the other, turning his palms over. He then examined himself. The very clothes he wore were glowing also; the deep turquoise of his clothes had lightened dramatically, as had his black sleeves and black boots. They were all the same colours now, all glowing white and very pale blue and silver, shining brightly, even in the sun in the clear sky above him he shone.

Cam lifted his hands, running his fingers through his hair, brushing his hair back out of his face. As he did so, the black ran from his hair too, seeping like oil between his fingers. Cam moved off the road, and to a small pond nearby, craning forwards over the water to see himself. The water was clear, crystal clear and clean, and as Cam leant forwards, he could see his reflection staring back at him, and he saw himself.

His hair was pure white like fresh snow; his skin glowed, as did his clothes.

His entire appearance was blazing brightly.

He looked like a celestial being, an angel...

Cam straightened again, still in awe and astonishment.

‘What is happening to me?’ he whispered.

‘That’s pretty impressive!’

Cam started; he spun around to face the figure that had spoken, breathing heavily in fear. His skin instantly stopped glowing, his hair returned to black and his clothes returned to their original colours.

His breath calmed slightly, as he saw the figure was not a soldier as he had first feared, but a merchant of some kind. His white and black horse was stocky, with a long mane and feathers at its feet. The wooden carriage it pulled behind was decorated and vividly painted in all sorts of bright colours. The merchant himself was a gypsy, with tanned skin, painted eyes and wearing a bandana.

Cam was surprised that he had not seen nor heard him coming.

‘Who are you?’ the merchant asked curiously. ‘Those are some fine clothes you wear, like that of royalty. What are you doing out here alone in the middle of nowhere?’

Cam stared at him wide-eyed, gasping like a fish out of water, before his eyes rolled to the back of his head and he collapsed.

Cam woke sometime later, blinking wearily and trying to make sense of his surroundings.

He was lying on a bed, staring up at a wooden ceiling above him, the curtains in the small window beside him were a rich purple, and there were lamps fixed to the walls all around.

Cam sat up suddenly, hand going to his head as he was enveloped by a sudden wave of dizziness.

‘Easy there’ came a voice. ‘Don’t move too fast, you might make yourself ill.’

Cam lowered his hand as his vision began to clear.

‘Who are you?’ Cam asked the man sitting in a chair beside the bed.

‘My name is Durril’ the man replied. ‘What’s yours?’

Cam sobbed, burying his face in his hands.

‘Hey...’ Durril laughed uncertainly. ‘I was only asking for your name, I sorry. You don’t have to tell me if you really don’t want to.’

‘It’s Cam’ he whimpered, brushing his tears away.

‘Why are you crying?’ Durril asked him. ‘What happened to you?’

‘My brother’ Cam whispered. ‘I left my brother at home...and...’ *Valery...*

‘Did someone hurt you?’ Durril asked, his tone becoming serious.

‘What?’ Cam gasped.

‘You’ve got bruising all over your body’ Durril said, ‘and cuts.’

‘I fell from my horse.’

‘It looks like you’ve been kicked repeatedly’ Durril said.

Cam fell silent.

‘I tried to patch up some of the cuts you had’ Durril explained. ‘You had a nasty one on your shoulder.’ He reached towards him, touching Cam’s shirt where he had cut the fabric to get to the wound easier.

He pulled the material back as if to check on it. Cam instantly panicked, slapping his hand away and drawing away from him on the bed.

‘Don’t touch me!’

Durril stared at him in shock, lowering his hand slowly as he stared at Cam.

He paused.

‘Something awful has happened to you’ he mumbled. ‘I can see it in your eyes.’

Cam didn’t answer, only glared back at him fearfully.

There came a whinnying from the horse outside, and Durril was snapped back to attention.

He left the carriage quickly then to look outside, returning seconds later.

‘There are men riding this way’ he told Cam, who instantly paled. ‘Are they after you?’

‘I...I...’

‘I can help hide you, but you must trust me.’

‘I....’

‘Do you trust me?’ Durril spoke harshly.

‘N-n-n-n-...I mean....I d-d-d-d....’

Durril grabbed him roughly by his arm, pulling him from the bed and dragging him outside, Cam whimpering as he was pulled along.

‘Hide under the carriage’ Durril told him.

‘W-what?’

‘I think you should hide under the carriage’ Durril repeated. ‘You can hold onto the axel underneath. They might not check there.’

Cam hesitated. In the distance he could hear the footfalls of horses drawing swiftly closer, but they were out of sight.

‘Now!’ Durril hissed.

Cam was broken from his trance. He lay quickly on the ground and rolled beneath the carriage, grabbing onto the axel and lifting himself up.

Here he waited.

He felt the carriage rock as he held on, Durril had entered the carriage, or perhaps he had entered the driver’s seat at the front.

Cam breathed slowly through his mouth, trying hard to steady his racing heart. His palms began to sweat as he heard the horses draw closer.

Cam turned his head to the side, seeing one of the horse's legs as it pranced alongside the carriage.

'Good day sirs' Durril called jovially above him. 'To what do I owe the pleasure?'

Cam squeezed his eyes tight shut, praying in his heart not to be found.

His concentration wandered, and for a moment he didn't hear what was said. And then he heard Durril speak again.

'You're free to check the carriage if you want. Not much in there I'm afraid though, well...nothing that will interest you folk I'm sure.'

Cam felt the carriage rock again as several bodies stepped into it. They left quickly after, lingering only for a few seconds. The carriage was small and there was not much to search.

There was some mumbled conversation, a prolonged explanation that Cam could not understand, and then they moved on.

Cam heard the sound of the soldiers mounting their horses and riding away, ahead of them down the road.

He listened to the diminishing sound of the horses hooves upon the earthy surface.

But Cam dared not let go until he saw Durril's face smiling down at him as he knelt beside the carriage.

'See?' he told him. 'All better.'

He waited.

'You can come out now' Durril prompted. 'It's safe.'

Cam tightened his grip, before letting out a sigh and allowing his body to fall gently back to the ground again. Rolling onto his front he crawled out from beneath the carriage.

Durril stepped back to give him space as Cam straightened up.

Cam regarded the gypsy, taking another good look at him.

'Why...' Cam said, 'why did you help me?'

'As if I could turn a blind eye to one in need' the gypsy smiled. 'What kind of a world would this be if we didn't help each other?'

Cam wiped away more tears as the man spoke.

'Again?' Durril sighed in exasperation. 'I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?' he reached out as if to comfort him, but drew sharply back then, remembering the last time did so.

'Thank you...' Cam whispered through his tear. 'Thank you....no one's ever been so kind to me...'

Durril watched him in surprise for a moment, before smiling again, his expression warm.

'Don't worry about it' he beamed. 'It was nothing. Now, are you heading anywhere in particular?'

'....Um....I...'

'I didn't think so' Durril interrupted with a grin. 'Come on, you can ride with me, but I think it's best if you stay inside the carriage, at least for now. You know....in case we see those soldiers again. I've got loads of books in there.' He encouraged. 'Read whatever you like, touch whatever you like. Just put it back where you found it. Kay?'

'And...' Cam began tentatively, '...what do you want in return?'

'Nothing!' Durril sang merrily. 'Nothing at all!'

Cam stayed inside the carriage for a long while after that, feeling the gentle bumps as the carriage jostled along the road, pulled by the long maned white and black horse.

Cam felt utterly exhausted, his body thoroughly drained and his muscles like lead.

Everything that had happened to him in the last few hours seemed like a dream. He could hardly believe that he was even happening.

Luke... he thought vaguely and Valery...I wonder where you are now....

He sighed heavily, closing his eyes.

Despite his exhaustion, it took him a long while to get to sleep, his mind so fraught with worry.

He didn't know how long he had been asleep, but he was woken sometime later by the sound of music.

Cam opened his eyes, recognising the tune played on the flute just outside the carriage. It was a common tune, and one that almost everyone would know.

Cam pushed himself up, staring across the carriage.

It was still now, and besides from the tune played outside, everything was silent.

It was dark. Cam could see that it was night.

He rose, moving across the carriage and slowly opening the door, stepped outside.

The night's breeze was cool. Cam saw that Durril had made a camp beside the carriage, sitting now beside a crackling fire, his horse lying down on its side nearby. Cam could tell by the horse's slow breathing, that the animal was fast asleep.

Cam closed the carriage door and Durril instantly stopped playing, turning as he heard Cam's soft steps as he approached.

'Ah' he said, breaking into a wide grin. 'He's awake. How did you sleep?'

'Fine' Cam mumbled in reply.

He took a seat on the ground near Durril, though keeping a distance between them. Durril watched him closely.

'That...' Cam began uncomfortably, 'that was a nice tune.'

'You liked it?'

'I didn't know you could play.'

'What sort of a gypsy would I be if I didn't have skills in instruments? I can play many. I am an entertainer after all. Many people find me pleasing...including you.'

'Hu?'

'The tune' Durril said, lifting his flute to indicate. 'You liked it.'

'Oh' Cam said. 'Yes...'

'In that case' Durril said reaching for a bag which sat beside him, 'I have something for you.'

He put his flute down on his lap as he foraged through the bag.

'No not that...' he mumbled to himself as he searched, 'no...no...where is it now...? Ah.'

He straightened again, pulling a second flute out.

He turned grinning towards Cam, holding out the flute for him to take.

'For you.'

'Me?'

Cam stared down at it, eyes wide.

‘It’s not poisonous’ Durril frowned in amusement. ‘It’s not a snake. It’s not going to bite you.’

Cam took it, holding it in both his hands, he examined it.

It was beautifully carved and vividly painted in pretty patterns.

‘I sell several like that’ Durril told him. ‘Instruments sell quite well, especially exceptionally decorated ones like that.’

‘This is for me?’ Cam asked him again.

‘Yes’ Durril laughed. ‘It’s a gift. Have you never received a gift before?’

Cam held it close to him, over his beating heart. ‘Thank you’ he mumbled. ‘You’re very kind.’

‘Do you know how to play the flute?’

‘No.’

‘Do you know how to play any instrument?’

‘No.’

‘*Have* you ever played any instrument ever?’

‘No.’

‘Well you’re never too old to learn’ Durril beamed. ‘Put it to your lips. Play a tune. Any tune.’

Cam baulked.

‘It’s ok!’ Durril waved at him energetically. ‘Just make a sound, any sound...like this....’

He played random notes on his own flute to demonstrate.

‘Go on’ he encouraged. ‘Try it, it’s easy.’

Cam hesitated, bringing the instrument to his lips and playing one long note.

‘Excellent’ Durril said clapping enthusiastically. ‘That is how we all begin! That is how I began to learn this instrument. You’ve got a long way to go, but I know in time you will learn to be as musically gifted as I am’ he said, touching his own chest proudly. ‘Just you wait and see. You’re going to be magnificent...I just *know* it.’

For about an hour or so after that, Durril taught him the basics, until Cam was able to play a simple tune.

Durril congratulated him enthusiastically, and then they went to sleep.

For the rest of that night they both slept outside by the fire, near the horse that Cam had learnt was called Sapphire, who twitched happily as she slept, and above them, the stars shone brightly.

Cam slept peacefully, and he dreamed.

He dreamed of Lucy, someone he had once known. She was exactly as he had last seen her, beautiful, with hair orange like the setting sun. He sat at the table now with her family, eating a meal together, and he felt happy.

Cam woke shortly after, the memory of his dream quickly scattering. He gasped as he saw his own skin begin to lighten.

‘Oh no...’ he whispered, suddenly wide awake. ‘It’s happening again...’

Beside him Durril was already awake and sitting up watching him closely.

‘Incredible’ he breathed as Cam rose to his feet, holding his arms out and staring down at himself. ‘The gods themselves could be no more beautiful.’

‘I can’t stop it’ Cam told him beginning to panic. ‘I can’t stop it I don’t know how!’

‘Calm down’ Durril told him firmly. ‘Just be calm.’

Cam stared at his hands. They were pure white now, glowing like the sun. He turned and reached into Durril’s bag, pulling from it a mirror and looking at his own reflection.

He gasped then, dropping the mirror.

‘My hair is white!’

‘It’s alright’ Durril said, showing his hands as he tried to calm him down, in a way one would do to a frightened animal. ‘This happened before didn’t it? It’ll probably go away in a minute. How did you trigger it?’

‘I don’t know!’ Cam called back, his voice shaking as his body began to tremble.

‘Well what were you thinking of?’ Durril asked.

Lucy.....

Cam hugged himself, stifling a sob.

‘I think it looks interesting’ Durril said encouragingly, tilting his head and tapping his chin. ‘I have never seen such a thing before...it’s like *magic*.’ He grinned then. ‘I would even go so far as to say the white hair suits you.’

‘I can’t stop it....’ Cam whispered, tears welling in his eyes. ‘I can’t stop it.’

‘Relax’ Durril told him firmly. ‘Take a deep and slow breath, then take another one...slow and steady.’

Cam did so, squeezing his eyes tight shut and digging his nails into his own arms as he held himself, breathing slowly, once, twice.

He opened his eyes.

Cam looked down at himself quickly then. He was normal again, and Durril was smiling.

‘You...’ he said to Cam in quiet awe, ‘...you really are something special.’

Cam turned to face him.

‘I wonder how much I would get for you if I sold you’ Durril pondered aloud. ‘I’m only joking’ he added hastily waving Cam away. ‘I would never do such a thing.’

Cam fell to his knees then, Durril rushed up to catch him before he collapsed.

‘Are you alright?!’

‘I feel so sick and dizzy...’ Cam mumbled. ‘I can’t see anything....’

‘You’ve over exerted yourself...somehow’ he added quietly to himself. ‘Just rest for a moment, you’ll be fine.’

Cam sat quietly for a while with his head between his knees and trying not to throw up.

When he felt better again, he raised his head.

‘I’ve got to go for a minute’ Durril told him as the sun began to rise. ‘I set a few rabbit traps nearby the other day. I’m going to go see if I caught anything.’ He paused then as he made to leave. ‘You sleep for a long time by the way’ he added. ‘If you’re still tired why don’t you sleep in the carriage? It’s more comfortable in there.’

Durril slipped away quietly, disappearing into the bushes as he went.

Cam rose gingerly to his feet, taking Durril's advice and returning to the carriage.

He lay down upon the soft bed, silent tears running down his cheeks as he thought of those dearest to him.

Valery...where are you...what are you doing now? And Luke...I hope to the gods you are safe...please...please don't die...

Durril returned an hour or so later, carrying in his hand three dead rabbits. He had knocked loudly on the carriage door, waking Cam abruptly.

'Success!' Durril had said to him when Cam tentatively opened the door a crack. 'Guess what we'll be eating later!'

Now Cam and Durril sat side by side at the head of the carriage in the driver's seat as Sapphire pulled the carriage along.

'I tell you what' Durril was saying, 'today is going to be a spectacular day, I just *know* it. Don't ask me how I know, but I just know it. I really do!'

Cam listened to him sullenly as he talked, sitting beside him with a blanket wrapped around him to protect him from the morning chill. Durril wore no such thing however. He had exerted himself this morning catching the rabbits, and felt quite hot, and full of energy.

Durril, Cam had quickly learned, was full of energy.

'Look a bird!' Durril cried suddenly pointing to one flying overhead. 'I love birds!'

And then he broke into song.

Far over mountains and hilltops and plains
There lies a bell that was shattered again
In the dirt and dishevelled, all beaten and cracked
It fell from its tower, when the rope up there snapped

Down it fell! With a crash, that rang out for miles
The townsfolk came around, no longer they smiled
Light the furnace! Bring wood! Bring the axes out fast
Fell the trees that grow tall
No longer they last

And the townsfolk they gather again, working, now all as one
In the silence they fill, together, now under the sun

Dee doo de de do da da da da da daa
Da da da da da da, da da da da daa
Bada bum bum bum bum bada bum bum bum
Da da da da da dadum dum dum dum

And the bells are ringing out, from whence they came....

He was extremely energetic for about an hour or so, until he had worn himself out, then he had fallen silent.

‘Cam’ he said after a time glancing towards him drowsily. ‘Could you please take the reins?’

‘Um...alright...’

‘There’s nothing to it’ Durril said handing the reins over to him. ‘Sapphire will lead the way...just keep to this road and you’ll be fine...’

He leant away from Cam then, resting against wood beside him and closing his eyes.

Cam watched him silently, before looking ahead again.

He swallowed nervously as he held the reins, but the horse didn’t seem to notice the driver had changed, and if she did, she didn’t care.

Cam was at first nervous about holding the reins, but after a time he felt a little more at ease, until they approached a fork in the road.

‘Durril!’ he said urgently nudging him. ‘What do I do?’

Durril groaned awake, furrowing his brow moodily at being disturbed. ‘Left’ he mumbled.

Cam didn’t move.

‘Pull the left reign’ Durril told him. ‘Gently now...’

Cam did so, and Sapphire tossed her head, turning gently to one side as Cam moved her.

‘There’ Durril said with satisfaction once they were on the right road. ‘Not so bad.’

Durril grinned happily to himself as he sat back again, closing his eyes and drifting off.

Cam glanced towards him, before looking ahead again. The horse seemed to know what she was doing.

Cam sat back, holding the reins lightly in his hands. He let out a sigh, feeling relaxed.

This surprised him.

They travelled onwards for some time, their journey uneventful, until Cam saw something approaching them on the road. A carriage like the one they led now, heading in their direction. Like theirs it was brightly painted, and pulled along by a long maned white and black horse, like Sapphire.

‘Durril?’ Cam said nervously.

Durril woke quickly, yawning and rubbing his face, before looking at the road ahead of them, blinking wearily.

Cam became a little nervous as he saw Durril tense.

‘What?’ Cam asked him shortly, becoming a little scared now. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing!’ Durril said beaming now and rising to his feet.

‘Then what-?’

‘HEEEYY!’ Durril called, standing tall and waving at the figures on the carriage approaching theirs.

Cam saw as the two figures sitting on the carriage, a man and a woman, stood also, waving and calling back to Durril.

Cam let out a heavy sigh, slumping back in his seat with relief. For a moment he had feared the worse.

‘Here’ Durril said taking the reins from him and snapping them sharply. ‘Let’s get this thing parked up’ he said as Sapphire tossed her head back, trotting quickly as Durril directed her off the road and onto the grass nearby.

Durril pulled the reins back sharply and Sapphire stopped abruptly, skidding to a halt. The carriage approaching them had done the same, pulling up beside theirs.

Cam got a closer look at the man and woman who rode in this carriage. It was clear at a glance that they were gypsies, with their bright clothes and bandana’s tied around their heads to keep their black hair back, their skin was tanned and both wore dark eyeliner.

‘Durril!’ the man cried, climbing out of the driver’s seat and leaping across the space between them and right onto their carriage.

Cam stared back a little shocked at this as the stranger appeared right by his side. He shrank back nervously as Durril embraced the man tightly.

‘It’s so good to see you again brother!’ Durril sang.

‘As it is you’ the man beamed.

They broke apart, and Durril moved past him, jumping onto the other carriage towards the woman.

Cam glanced around the stranger’s body as he stood beside him, watching as Durril and this gypsy woman kissed, holding each other tightly as if their life depended on it.

‘So who are you?’ the gypsy man asked Cam, breaking his attention from the couple. ‘I’ve not seen you before?’ he continued, as Cam leant away, staring up at him. ‘Are you a stray or something? What is your name?’

‘Um....me? I’m just....Cam...’

‘Well, my name is Lel’ the gypsy replied, bending forward and extending his hand for Cam to take. ‘It’s nice to meet you.’

‘Yes’ Cam said, tentatively reaching forwards and shaking his hand. ‘You too.’

‘What a happy reunion!’ Durril sang from behind Lel, climbing down from the other carriage and helping the gypsy woman down also.

Cam watched the couple.

‘This is Zeana’ Durril introduced, resting a hand upon her shoulder. ‘She is named after the goddess you worship in this kingdom. A bold name indeed.’

They made a camp together shortly after, then sat around the fire and talked and ate and were merry.

Later that night, Durril and Zeana slipped away quietly together.

‘Where are they going?’ Cam asked Lel.

‘They need their time together’ he answered simply. ‘They have not seen one another for quite some time.’

‘Why do people kiss?’ Cam asked him.

Lel raised his head.

‘Either you’re very naive’ he said to Cam, ‘or you’ve led a very sheltered life.’

When Cam didn’t answer (unsure how best to) Lel continued.

‘People who are in love with each other kiss’ he explained, ‘like a husband and wife.’

Cam frowned uncertainly at this, even more confused than before.

‘Husband and wife?’ he murmured.

Cam thought of his own parents who had been married. He had never once in his entire life seen them kiss, or show any love for each other in any way.

And then he thought of Auntie, and how she had kissed that man before he killed her.

And then he thought of Brioke, forcing himself upon him.

His stomach turned.

Cam could still feel his touch, even now. He could feel Brioke's lips upon his, and then the pain.

'It doesn't make sense' Cam mumbled.

Lel watched Cam curiously, tilting his head at him.

'Have you never loved before?' Lel asked him.

'What do you mean?'

'Well...' Lel began. 'Have you ever met a woman that made your heart skip a beat?'

Cam thought about that for a few moments.

'Yes' he said in a distant voice. 'But...'

'You've never told her how you feel?'

'N-no.'

Cam turned away.

Lel leant back where he sat; lifting the violin that rested beside him he began to play.

Cam listened in silence to the beautiful solitary tune that echoed through the night, all the while thinking of Valery, thinking of Durril and Zeana, and the strangeness of it all.

Might he and Valery have been like that one day? Was there perhaps still a chance?

He hoped so.

Chapter Fourteen

Durril and Zeana did not return for hours.

When Cam finally woke, the sun was already lighting up the sky. He had lay back against the tree, just for a moment to close his eyes, and had fallen quickly asleep.

He must have been more exhausted than he realised, for he had been asleep in mere seconds.

'You're back' Cam said hastily to Durril, rising to his feet the moment he appeared.

'Why?' Durril grinned slyly back at him. 'Did you miss me?'

Durril was seemingly always in a good mood. But right now he seemed happier than he had been before, friskier even.

Zeana appeared by his side, holding onto his arm lovingly.

'Durril' she said to him. 'Would you like some breakfast?'

They ate quickly together, cooking sausages around the fire, before parting ways.

Durril and Zeana kissed for one last time, as Lel shook Cam's hand.

'It was wonderful to meet you' Lel said to him, 'a real honour.'

Cam didn't know what to say to that, so he simply smiled silently and nodded back to him.

They each readied their own horses, and got on their own carriages again, waving at each other one last time before going in opposite directions, and heading the ways they had been before, each to a different destination.

'Why don't you stay with them?' Cam asked Durril as the carriage trundled onwards.

'We both have our own paths' Durril gleamed, casting him a sideways glance. 'I will see them both again soon.' His attention drifted to Cam's body then.

'You need some new clothes' Durril told him facing forwards again. 'Can you drive the carriage for me?'

'What?'

Durril waited expectantly for an answer.

'Me? You mean now?'

'Yeah' Durril laughed. 'There's no one else around. It's easy, just hold the reins...here' he said forcing them into his hands. 'Sapphire will lead the way.'

Before Cam could protest, Durril slipped away from the driver's seat, crawling over the roof of the carriage and carefully climbing down the side, opening the door and slipping inside the carriage itself.

Cam listened carefully, wondering what Durril was doing. He heard faint sounds, like things being moved around from inside the carriage. He gulped nervously, holding the reins in both hands which trembled slightly. But he need not have been worried. Sapphire, continued forwards at a gentle pace, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the driver had changed. The road ahead of them was smooth and more or less straight.

Cam let out a heavy breath, slumping back in the seat and closing his eyes. He felt suddenly very tired.

'Are you alright up front?'

The unexpected noise caught him off guard, and Cam suddenly jerked to attention.

'Y-yes!' he called loudly back. 'Everything's fine here...I mean...I'm just fine....just waiting...but I'm ok....'

'Good!' Durril smiled cheerily back as he leant through the carriage window to see him. 'Just checking!'

Cam caught a glance of his cheeky grin, before his head disappeared back inside again.

He focused hard on the road before him.

They stopped a short time later, travelling off the road a short distance and coming to stop by a clear lake, secluded in a small section of woodland.

'Ok' Durril sang merrily, standing on the shore of the lake with his hands upon hips as he gazed happily out at the waters. 'This is a good spot.' He turned back to Cam. 'You can bathe here.'

'Oh' Cam replied timidly.

'It's ok' Durril waved at him. 'I'll wait in the carriage for you. I'm tired. I think I'll have a nap.' He indicated to the rock beside him where he had placed a small bundle. 'These are spare clothes you can have. They should fit you. You'd be about my size I think.' He winked playfully at him. 'Have fun!'

He turned on his heel and strode away.

‘Wait!’ Cam called after him. ‘What is it that you want me to do?’

Durril hesitated, giving him a peculiar look. ‘Have a wash’ he said as if it were obvious. ‘Throw away your old clothes after you’re clean. Wake me when you’re done.’

He walked away without another word.

Cam watched as he circled around the carriage, it rocked gently as he stepped into it, then became still. Cam presumed he was resting on his bed now.

Cam turned slowly towards the lake behind him. Everything around him was tranquil and silent; it was almost like a dream. The horse Sapphire wandered on a long rope tied to a tree, allowed to go a short distance and graze.

Cam moved closer to the water. The sky was clear above, the birds he could hear singing in the trees in the woods behind him, and everything was peaceful, was calm.

Cam had never known such serenity.

He slowly unbuttoned his shirt, pausing to glance back at the carriage, where he saw no movement.

He slipped the shirt down his shoulders, then began to unbutton his breeches.

Cam cast his old and filthy clothes aside, stepping forwards into the cool lake.

The water felt good against his skin, and as Cam swam forwards, he felt his feet leave the ground beneath him as he reached deeper waters.

Cam swam out into the middle of the lake, staring up at the blue sky above, thinking of his brother and Valery, and wondering where they were and what they were doing now.

Cam didn’t know what would happen, tomorrow, or even in the next hour, but at this moment in time, he felt happy.

He left the water when he began to feel chilled, drying himself quickly and putting on the clothes Durril had left for him. They felt so different, so strange and foreign. The clothes were unlike anything he had ever worn before. They were all very brightly coloured. Cam had never worn orange before in his life, not even when he was a child.

He dressed quickly, and went over to the carriage, knocking on the door before entering.

Durril woke quickly, sitting up and pushing the book aside that had been resting open on his face. He had been using it to shield the light from his eyes.

‘Wow!’ he cried dramatically, clapping his hands together as he applauded Cam. ‘You look magnificent!’

Cam bowed his head, feeling self conscious.

‘Wait’ Durril noticed suddenly. ‘There’s something missing.’

He went over to one of the draws nearby, pulling out a piece of fabric and folding it.

He took a step towards Cam, raising the fabric to Cam’s head.

Cam suddenly flinched.

‘It’s ok’ Durril said in a quiet voice, moving slowly now. ‘I won’t hurt you. I promise.’

He tied the bandana around Cam’s head. Tugging his fringe out at the front so that it lay over the bandana and pulling the trailing end forwards so that it hung over his shoulder.

‘There’ he said when he stopped his fussing. ‘Would you like to have a look?’ he teased.

Durril pulled forth a mirror, showing Cam his reflection.

Cam barely recognised himself. Not only had he dressed in different clothes, but it felt like now he wore someone else’s skin too.

‘You look handsome’ Durril gleamed. ‘All the women would be throwing themselves at your feet.’

Cam didn’t know what he meant by that, so he did the thing he always did when he didn’t understand something.

He stayed silent.

‘What do you think?’ Durril prompted.

‘I...I like it’ Cam said gradually. ‘I look completely different...but...’ he paused. ‘I think it suits me.’

He raised his head to face Durril.

‘What happens now?’ he asked him. ‘With me I mean?’

‘You will be my travelling companion; we will traverse these lands together as unlikely friends. I will teach you the tricks of the trade, and you will help me with my work.’

‘I’ll do whatever you want me to’ Cam told him.

‘Good. Then you can begin by setting up camp. Light a fire!’ he called dramatically grabbing the air with a fist. ‘I’m starving for some good food!’

Interlude start

Many years ago (before Cam became king)

The cloaked figure moved slowly across the rocky beach, doing so carefully in the dark.

Behind him, the great spires of the city grew into the sky like stalagmites, glowing faintly green. They looked strange, like something out of a fairy tale.

But the man did not care for its beauty; his attention was fixed on the water.

The waves of the ocean were gently lapping against the rocks.

‘Sceptre’ he hissed in the dark.

There was a pause in which nothing happened. And then a head appeared from the water. The figure rose until her shoulders were visible.

‘Rodrigo’ she sighed.

His face broke into a smile; she could see him clearly in the dark, better than he could see her.

He moved forwards into the water, doing so carefully so as not to slip on the rocks. Sceptre held her arms out to him as he bent down in the water, picking her up.

The water sloshed as he lifted her from the sea, the end of her scaly tail dragged in the water as he moved back towards the shore, carrying her in his arms.

She was a beautiful creature, the most beautiful he had ever seen in his life. And that’s why he came for her, because she had stolen his heart. He was in love, and as infatuated with her as she was with him.

Rodrigo gazed at her as he waded slowly through the sea, the water reaching his waist.

Her skin was pale in the moonlight. Her long black hair was tied into six pony tails; two rows of three vertically either side at the back of her head. Her body was slender and beautiful and mature. Her chest was covered by two great sea shells, and over her bare skin, around the many jewels that clung to her body and around the base of her tail, were extensive tattoos. Stunning and intricately detailed black swirls and shapes, it was a masterpiece painted on living flesh.

Rodrigo's steps became easier as he drew closer to shallower water, eventually coming onto dry land.

Sceptre clung to him, shoulders hunched as he carried her, and pressing a hand against his chest, feeling his heart beat.

'I've missed you' she whispered. 'I've longed to see you again.'

'As have I' he whispered back. 'Don't worry my love. We will be together forever from now on. Nothing will keep us apart.'

'Nothing would make me happier' she said, closing her eyes in content, 'and nothing will keep us apart. We will both be part of the same world...from now on...'

'I want that' Rodrigo said. 'I really do.'

He carried her across the beach, the moonlight shining his path before him.

Rodrigo reached the end of the beach, where there lay a body before him, a clockwork body.

He stopped before it, standing over the body.

'What do you think?' Rodrigo asked her. 'Do you like it?'

Sceptre gazed down at the body, which lay on the sands, utterly lifeless. It looked just like her in every way, except the body instead of having a tail, had legs.

'You could live with us' Rodrigo told her, 'amongst us...as one of the gods...'

'Oh Rodrigo' Sceptre uttered, tears of joy shimmering in her eyes. 'There's nothing I want more in this world...'

Rodrigo leant towards her, kissing her passionately. She held him around the neck, hugging him as she kissed him back.

They broke apart.

'I love you Rodrigo. I always will.'

He smiled warmly down at her, holding her to him tightly.

He approached the clockwork body, intending to lay Sceptre down on the sand beside it. But he hesitated suddenly, hearing a strange sound coming from the body.

A series of beeps.

Rodrigo suddenly turned, shielding Sceptre from the explosion.

He turned back in shock, staring in disbelief at the charred remains of the clockwork body, as he held Sceptre in his arms.

The body had been completely destroyed.

'I knew it was you' came another voice.

Rodrigo only just spotted the female, when she raised a gun and fired.

He screamed in horror as the bullet went through Sceptre's head.

The world seemed to slow, as her head snapped sharply back by the impact, her body instantly limp in his arms as the blood shot out the back of her head, spraying the sands.

'Sceptre!' Rodrigo screamed. 'Sceptre!'

But it was no use, she was already dead.

Rodrigo collapsed, falling to his knees and cradling his beloved in his arms.

‘Why...?’ and then he raised his head, glaring with raw hatred and passion, towards the killer. ‘Argentina...’

Rodrigo lowered the body of the mermaid carefully onto the beach, before rising to his feet.

‘How...?’ he said to the cloaked female figure standing before him, wearing the crows mask.

‘How could you do that?!’

Argentina only smiled, twirling the gun in her hand before slipping it beneath her cloak again to hide it.

‘I loved her!’ Rodrigo screamed at the masked figure, throwing his arms out. ‘I loved her!’

‘As I loved another?’ Argentina asked quietly. ‘As I...*loved another...*’

She glided towards Rodrigo, showing her hands submissively as she did so.

‘You killed someone I cared about’ Argentina told him. ‘Do you remember her? She went by the name of Auntie.’

Rodrigo’s eye twitched.

Argentina bowed her head to the bodies before her. The charred mechanical one, and the beautiful scaly body of the mermaid.

‘I see’ Argentina said quietly. ‘There can only be eight of us, and the only way to recruit another, is if one of us dies...isn’t that right....?’

Rodrigo’s snarled like a wild animal, baring his teeth in savage rage.

‘Auntie was my friend. No...she was more than that.’ Argentina removed her mask. ‘I loved her like a sister...’

Rodrigo didn’t answer.

‘She loved you Rodrigo’ Argentina said. ‘How could you do that to her? How *could* you?’

‘As if your past isn’t tainted with sin’ Rodrigo answered bitterly.

‘Don’t change the subject; what you’ve done is barbaric and cruel.’ Argentina whipped out a blade from beneath her cloak as she said this. ‘You murdered her in cold blood! I may be guilty of sin, but I never betrayed anyone close to me. I never betrayed anyone who *loved* me.’

Rodrigo roared in fury, crouching and pulling forth his own weapon that he hid. He charged towards Argentina who blocked his attack.

Their swords clashed in the air, Rodrigo’s arms shook with the effort to hold her back, but her own clockwork body was strong, and she held her stance with ease.

Rodrigo leaned closer towards her, hands still on the hilt of his sword. He gritted his teeth, glaring at her in rage, their faces inches apart.

Argentina’s expression was that of peace. She appeared relaxed, but Rodrigo knew her well. She hid her emotions; inside she was just as consumed with hate as he was.

Rodrigo leapt back, swinging his arm and flinging his sword straight at her. The blade spun through the air towards her, but Argentina suddenly vanished from where she stood, the sword sailing harmlessly through the air and landing softly with a thud on the sand.

Rodrigo turned to his side just as Argentina appeared out of thin air right before him, barrelling into him and knocking him over.

Rodrigo fell onto his back, casting his hand out and grasping the hilt of the sword he had thrown, which had materialized right into his hand by magic.

He pointed the tip towards Argentina, who bore over him. He drove it with all the force he could muster through her navel, piercing her right the way through.

Argentina moaned, coughing up blood instantly which flecked his face. She gritted her teeth in pain as he twisted his sword inside her, doing so to deliberately hurt her.

Argentina raised her head, body trembling, as Rodrigo lying on his back, felt pieces from her fall onto him as she knelt over him.

Cogs from her clockwork body, mixed with blood.

‘You know you can’t kill me’ Argentina groaned through gritted teeth. ‘At least...not that easily...not like this....’

She relaxed her body, deliberately so that she rested upon him. The only thing keeping their bodies from being any closer, was the hilt of the sword between them.

Argentina giggled, caressing Rodrigo’s hair playfully. ‘You know’ she said, ‘this will take a while to repair.’

She moaned again in pain as Rodrigo twisted the blade once more.

‘What are you trying to do? Avenge her death?’ Argentina asked referring to the mermaid she had just killed. ‘You won’t succeed.’

‘So are you going to kill *me*?’ he spat at her.

‘Don’t be silly. And find another replacement? What a hassle. We’ve already lost one of our own. I wouldn’t want the trouble of killing you and having to find two replacements. I’ve got far more important things to do.’

‘If you hadn’t interfered’ Rodrigo growled, feeling the damp sand soaking into the clothes at his back, ‘then you would have avoided a lot of hassle.’

‘No’ Argentina said simply. ‘A could not let that harlot be one of us, especially since you killed Auntie just to make a space for her. You won’t get to pick the new replacement because of this. I won’t let you.’

Rodrigo threw his head back, screaming and suddenly head-butting Argentina.

‘*You will not call her a harlot!*’ he howled. ‘*She was a princess of royal blood!*’

He looked crazed now as Argentina bore over him, blood running down his forehead where he had struck her. Even so, Argentina couldn’t resist goading him.

‘I wonder’ she began, ‘how were you planning on *fucking* a mermaid?’

Rodrigo could take no more. He screamed in rage until his throat was sore, jerking the sword out of her and throwing it aside. He grabbed her by the shoulders, rolling over so that he came on top of her, striking her with his bare hands, clawing and ripping and hitting and screaming. His hand shot to the side, reaching out for his sword which materialized in his hand and flipping it over. He lifted it high above his head, bringing it down hard and driving the hilt into her skull, again and again and again until the sword slipped from his fingers.

His arms were shaking and his whole body trembling as his breath came in wheezes. He struggled to breath now, tears streaked his face and eyes bloodshot red.

Beneath him, Argentina turned towards him, her face caved in and broken.

‘Does that make you feel better?’ she asked him calmly, gazing up at him.

‘I hate you...’ he whispered. ‘I hate you...’

Argentina sat up, pushing him off her and rising to her feet.

She straightened up, dusting the sand off of her clothes casually, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

‘You should come home now’ Argentina said to him, touching her face where she had been damaged. ‘The others are worried about you.’

‘I don’t care for any of them.’

‘Suit yourself.’

Argentina strolled away.

Rodrigo raised his head, glaring at her and feeling within him hatred to the extent he did not know was possible.

He turned his attention back towards the charred body behind him, rising to his feet and moving over to it.

Argentina paused, glancing curiously back at him.

‘You can’t have her’ she said to him. ‘You could never have her. We would not allow you to kill one dear to us, to betray her when she loved you...for *this* creature...’ she indicated the body. ‘A mermaid’ she shook her head. ‘Really.’

She turned and walked away. Rodrigo looked around to face her again, pure rage rising inside him once more.

He made to charge for her again, wanting to hurt her, to kill her, for what she had done. But before he could touch her, she whipped around, driving a long sharp blade right through his body.

Rodrigo hunched forwards, groaning in agony.

‘I gave you a chance to live’ Argentina spoke through a sneer, ‘but you chose to die. I knew it was a mistake bringing you into our world. Now the others can know that I was right.’

She jerked the blade sharply out of his body, cutting his head off in one swift move and walking away before the body had hit the floor.

‘Fool’ she hissed wiping the blade clean and hiding it beneath her cloak again. ‘You never had what it takes to be one of us.’

Interlude end

Cam travelled with Durril for several weeks after that, learning his life, learning his trade.

They only had a vague resemblance of a routine, most of the time they travelled when was convenient, slept when they were tired, ate in the evenings or at night when the fire would look the prettiest, and when it rained, they would withdraw into the carriage, after seeking shelter for the horse beneath trees.

One evening when sitting outside on the grassy earth, Durril leant back in his seat, holding a knee with both hands as he gazed up at the sky.

‘The stars are so beautiful’ he said in a distant voice. ‘They twinkle like jewels in the above, always sparkling...never fading.....they look so far away.’ He smiled to himself. ‘Imagine how much money we could make if we could collect them...they would be worth an absolute fortune...we could make more money than any king or queen...a thousand times over.’

Cam tilted his head back at the heavens.

'It would take a long time to collect them all' he noted.

'It would be worth it' Durril gleamed. 'If only we could.'

He turned to Cam then.

'Hey Cam' he said. 'Come over here for a moment.'

Cam rose to his feet, walking over to Durril and sitting next to him.

'I've been thinking about something for a while' Durril told him, sitting straight and facing him. 'You look great as a gypsy' he said to him, 'but there is still something missing, and I've just realised what.'

He took something out of his pocket then, opening it. It was a little silver tin, decorated with swirls on the case.

'It was so obviously' Durril said, speaking as if to himself. 'I cannot believe I didn't think of it before.'

He lifted the pencil to his own eyes, painting the eyeliner onto his own eye to demonstrate.

'All true gypsies wear this' he told Cam. 'May I?'

Cam moved to sit closer to him.

Durril lifted his hand to Cam's face. In days gone by, Cam would have flinched, would have panicked and lashed out in fear.

But Cam no longer felt these things towards Durril. Durril would even go so far as to think that Cam was beginning to trust him.

'This might feel a bit strange at first' Durril said lifting the pencil.

'Will it hurt?'

'Only if I poke you in the eye...which I won't' he added hastily. 'Just try to keep still ok?'

Cam listened, keeping as still as he could as Durril leant towards him. When he touched his skin, Cam did not flinch.

Durril moved slowly, drawing the black lines carefully around Cam's eyes.

'There' he said satisfied, leaning back when he was done seconds later. 'What do you think?' he asked Cam, showing his reflection to him in the mirror inside the tin.

Cam studied himself for the longest time.

And then he smiled.

'I like it' he said.

Several nights later, and Cam had learnt how to paint the liner on himself. He wore these black eyes permanently now. He liked it. It felt like he was distancing this new self from the self he used to be. The old self. The self that lived in fear every day.

The victim.

'I've gotten so used to it' Cam was saying some days later, 'I don't even feel it anymore.'

'You'll get to the point where you'll start to feel strange without it' Durril told him happily.

Cam smiled at this.

'Now come on' Durril said lifting his flute. 'Let's play.'

Durril began a tune as Cam lifted his own flute, joining in at the correct moment.

The two played together for a long while, their song echoing through the night.

They finished with a well known melody; the last note of the song stretched long, a sad yet beautiful one.

Durril lowered his flute, smiling quietly to himself, his eyes dreamy. He sighed, putting the flute away back into his bag. Cam did the same.

‘You know’ Durril began, raising his head to the sky. ‘This time is my favourite time. The nights here are so peaceful, just listen...can you hear that?’

Cam listened hard.

‘I can’t hear anything.’

‘I know’ Durril beamed turning to him. ‘Isn’t it wonderful?’

Cam fell silent then, hearing nothing around him.

‘You’re right’ he said. ‘It’s so quiet...’ he hugged himself, resting his chin on his knees.

Cam shivered slightly. The air was getting chillier. They had lit a healthy fire before them. But now it had died down, crackling as the little flames licked at the thin pieces of wood.

Durril sighed, reaching behind him for more wood and poking the fire with a thin branch, before throwing it on the fire too.

‘I like it too’ Cam spoke up suddenly.

‘What?’

‘The silence’ Cam answered quietly. ‘My home was never this silent, not like this anyway...this feels different.’

He felt a twinge of nervousness then, realising what he had said.

‘You’ve never spoken of your home before’ Durril remarked.

Cam frowned, turning towards him reluctantly.

‘You’ve never told me about where you came from’ Durril said. ‘Or your powers...’

‘Powers...’ Cam spoke quietly. ‘I don’t know if I would call it that. I don’t know what I would even call it at all.’

‘Magic then’ Durril said leaning back and holding a knee.

‘Yes. It is magic, I suppose. But I wouldn’t call it power....it does nothing after all...it just makes me glow...’ he stared at his own hands then, feeling the skin of his palms. He glared resentfully at himself. ‘It’s useless’ he grumbled. ‘*I’m* useless. I’m worried about it happening again when I don’t want it to. I can’t control it...useless....’

‘Still’ Durril said optimistically. ‘It’s pretty incredible. You never know, something might come of it.’

‘What do you mean?’

Durril shrugged. ‘When did it first happen?’

‘The.....first time we met....’

Durril laughed then. ‘No wonder you looked so surprised. Well...’ he said, ‘you may in time come to understand why it happened...happens...’ he corrected himself. ‘It might even be useful to you in time; you might learn to control it.’

‘How could glowing possibly be useful?’ Cam asked him flatly.

Durril shrugged happily. ‘Could light the way on a dark night?’

Cam smiled despite himself.

‘There are many highly skilled people in my home country’ Durril began. ‘One day we’ll go there. I travel to all sorts of places in my time. We’ll probably meet one of these skilled people along the way. Some people even call them magicians. They might know what’s happened to you to make you this way.’

Cam turned to face him.

‘Why did you leave your home?’

‘Why did you leave yours?’ Durril countered.

Cam fell silent.

Durril smiled sadly at him. ‘I’m sure you’ve had to live through some terrible experiences to be the way you were...are...still...’ he stretched, fiddling with the lace on his shoes. ‘My life has had its terrible moments. I wasn’t always a wanderer. I had a home once...a family...until fairly recently.’

Cam watched him closely as he spoke, keeping quiet as he listened.

‘I am happy in life now’ Durril said. ‘But I was once happier. My family were good. I loved all of them, and they loved me.’

Durril met Cam’s eyes.

‘I have always been a traveller, but I only left my home country after what happened. It happened only...a year...and a half ago...’

Durril lowered his eyes, speaking now in a flat tone.

‘My entire family were killed.’

Cam did not react.

‘I was the only survivor. I...saw everything...’ he went quiet for a moment, his body rigid, and teeth clenched. He relaxed slightly before continuing. ‘I remember the small house we used to own. We only spend a short while there, just a few short months in the year. We travelled most of the time...trading...that is how I learnt the business, where to go and when...who to buy and sell from...’ Durril fell silent for a moment. ‘We had many horses, beautiful horses, and lots of carriages, beautifully painted.....my father was the one who taught me to play the flute, when he was too busy, my older sister would play with me. We’d play the most wonderful melodies together, and...my younger brother...I used to have to look after sometimes when my parents left home. He was just a child, a real devil when he wanted to be. But I cherished him...that silly boy.’ He glanced sideways at Cam. ‘I hope you don’t regret anything’ he said to Cam. ‘I don’t know what you’re running away from but...’ he smiled weakly. ‘You know’ he began changing the subject. ‘One day I would love to have a family of my own, and children....my own family I can care for. I have a dream, of teaching them to play music, as I was taught to from a young age. I want to have many children, boys and girls of different ages.’

‘What about Zeana?’ Cam asked.

The edges of his lips twitched.

‘No’ he said. ‘I love her but...she’s not....’ He broke off. ‘I’m not sure how best to explain. We just want different things...I suppose.’

Cam turned away, staring with eyes unfocused towards the fire.

Love he thought to himself. *It’s so strange...even now I don’t understand it...*

‘My close family are gone’ Durril said, ‘I’ve lost them all, but scattered throughout this kingdom, I have many brothers and sisters and cousins and uncles and aunts. We care for each other...look out for one another...’ he glanced toward Cam then. ‘Do you have any blood-family you’ve left behind? Anyone you care about and truly miss?’

‘Just one’ Cam said. ‘A brother. My twin.’

Cam hung his head then, burying his face in his arms.

Luke he thought. *Where are you now...?*

Luke took a deep breath, before opening the door and taking a bold step forwards. The queen's bedroom was just as he remembered it; he hadn't visited this room in ages. 'What do you want?' Miranda asked him sullenly as she sat at her desk, brushing her blonde wig moodily. Her natural hair was black like her sons and cut very short. Luke let the door swing open, standing in doorway. 'Mother' he began. 'I have something to tell you.'

'Well you'd better be quick' Miranda said moodily, putting the wig back on the pedestal and turning to face him at last. 'I've got things I have to..... Hm?' she paused suddenly at his expression. 'Luke?' she spoke more seriously now. 'What's wrong?'

Luke turned his back to her, closing the door slowly before facing her again. He moved slowly across the room towards her, grabbing a chair as he went and dragging it with him across the floor. He swung the chair around and sat heavily up it, facing her. Miranda watched him uncertainly as he drew a steady breath, then another. 'Mother' Luke began. 'There's no easy way for me to tell you this, so I'm going to just come out and say it.'

She didn't speak, only continued to watch him silently. Luke continued. 'Cam has been sexually abused by Brioke since he was seven years old.'

Her eyes widened at this, her mouth fell open ever so slightly, brow furrowed. 'It started the day I broke my leg. That was the first time since father died that we were apart.'

And so Luke told her everything. Miranda listened to her son speak for several minutes, before silence lapsed in the room. The silence stretched on for a long time. The fire had burned down in the hearth, but the small flames still flickered. A draft from a window high above them whistled in the rafters, the chill was ever growing, as the fire slowly died.

'And...' Miranda spoke, finally breaking the silence, 'you are *absolutely* sure of this?'

'Yes' Luke said shortly. 'That is why he ran away.'

'...Yes.'

Miranda thought for a moment. She rose from her chair, turning her back on him and talking a few small steps away. 'Have two fully grown live pigs brought to my room.'

'What?' Luke was thrown off by the sudden strange comment. 'Just do it' Miranda groaned. 'Now. Get out of my room and don't come back.'

She ignored him then, waiting for him to leave, which Luke eventually did. A short while later, two fully grown live pigs were brought to her room. Miranda starved them for several days, keeping them locked in a room across from hers in the hall. Then she invited Brioke to visit her in her room. 'I do hope you have a good reason for summoning me here' Brioke said irritant. 'I'm a busy man you know.'

‘Of course’ Miranda replied politely, though of course this politeness was a façade. ‘Could you just pass me those notes on that table over there? I have something very important to show you.’

Brioke glanced around, moving over towards the desk. The instant his back was turned, Miranda plunged the knife sharply down through his shoulder, with all the strength she could muster.

Brioke had spun around in shock; the disbelief of what she had done written all over his face. He had then fallen on the ground, flapped around for a few seconds, then died.

As this happened, Miranda picked an apple from the fruit bowl at her desk and casually began to eat it, watching him bleed out.

When she had finished, she knelt over the body, pulling from her person a pair of pliers and opening his mouth. She then proceeded to one by one, pull his teeth out. Then she cut him into tiny pieces, and fed him to the starving pigs. And then she cleaned up the blood, washed herself, and burned her clothes.

After that, the pigs were slaughtered, and served as a dish to the members of the council.

A few days later, one of the council members stopped her in the corridor.

‘You haven’t seen Brioke by any chance have you?’ he asked.

‘Of course not’ Miranda asked. ‘What’s he got to do with me anyway, after all I’m just a woman? What good am I without my husband?’

The sarcasm was not lost on him. Though he could never have guessed what she had done.

No one ever found out what had happened to Brioke. He had simply....vanished.

Time passed, and after a while people stopped looking for him.

One day, Luke was leaning against the wall, at the head of the tower from which could be seen the outside world. Here he stood in a daze, staring out towards the horizon.

‘Cam...’ he spoke to the wind. ‘I hope you stay away from this dreadful place.’

Months pass

The market was bursting with people, and Cam struggled not to lose Durril through the crowd.

‘Keep up’ Durril sang jovially, turning and grabbing him by the arm, pulling him along. ‘If I lose you here, then I might never see you again.’

‘I’m sorry’ Cam gasped, stumbling after him, ‘I just...’

They broke through the crowd, stepping out into a courtyard that was empty enough to comfortably walk through, though people still wandered here, there were far fewer in number.

‘There’ Durril sighed, dusting himself off and straightening up, planting his hands on his hips happily. ‘That’s better.’

‘It sure is’ Cam smiled, flustered beside him.

‘Come’ Durril said, tapping Cam’s shoulder with the back of his hand and moving off. ‘This way.’

Cam followed after him.

They advanced into the courtyard further, approaching the line of soldiers who stood utterly still, like rows of columns, fully armed and armoured.

Cam picked up his pace slightly, sticking close to Durril, glancing at the soldiers around him uncertainly. The rows either side of them surrounded them, as they moved further into the courtyard.

‘Hey’ Durril said, sensing Cam’s hesitation he paused, smiling back at him. ‘It’s ok.’

Cam nodded, balling his fists. ‘I’m fine’ he said to the ground.

Durril bowed his head, walking on.

They reached the end of the courtyard, where there was a stall.

‘In this courtyard’ Durril began, pouring over the few pieces laid out on the velvet cloths upon the tables, ‘are sold the most expensive things that money can buy.’

Cam lifted his head, seeing upon the wall surrounding the courtyard, a line of archers, running all the way around them.

They were surrounded.

Cam swallowed the lump in his throat, balling his fists and trying to stop them from trembling.

‘Cam....Cam..... Cam!’

He gave a start, having only just heard him.

‘Are you ok?’ Durril asked, placing a hand upon his shoulder and tilting his head at him with concern.

‘T-t-t...’

‘Breath slowly’ Durril said to him gently. ‘Now speak.’

Cam closed his eyes, bowing his head before looking up at Durril again.

‘Take me away from here.’

‘I will’ Durril said. ‘Soon. I just want to look at a few things while we’re here. Don’t worry’ he added, seeing Cam’s distress at this. ‘You will be safe with me by your side.’ He paused.

‘You do feel safer with me right?’

‘Y-yes’ Cam said. ‘It’s just-just-just....I c-c-c-c-c...’ he huffed, turning away and gritting his teeth in frustration.

‘It’s ok’ Durril told him encouragingly. ‘Don’t speak if you’re struggling. Just stay silent and stick with me.’

Cam glared at Durril’s back resentfully as he followed him, moving closer to the tables.

‘This is a fine piece’ Durril said, reaching out to touch one of the items.

There was a line of guards behind the table, before them, sitting on large and luxurious seats were three men, positioned a short distance apart from each other. These were the sellers of the items upon the table.

‘Do you see this?’ Durril spoke to Cam, running his fingers along the item upon the table.

‘It’s the fossilised wing of a flying beast said to have lived hundreds of years ago, a beast made of three different animals, a chimera...now extinct. They say that one day the beast will be resurrected by magic, but first you need a piece of the creature itself. This wing alone costs more than most of us would make in our entire lives. Think how much the *living* creature would be worth!’ Durril lifted his eyes, gasping in astonishment at the sight of another piece. ‘Look here’ he hissed excitedly back at Cam.

He lifted what appeared to be a cloak from the table, but the instant he touched it, the material seemed to vanish within his very hands.

‘A cloak of invisibility’ Durril breathed, feeling it between his fingers. Only by touch did he know it was there. ‘Only a king could afford such a piece’ Durril said; eyes large and shimmering as he gazed longingly down at it. ‘Look Cam. Cam look!’ Durril said back to him. ‘....Cam?’

Cam did not respond. Durril turned towards him, seeing him properly. Cam’s shoulders were trembling. His black hair hung over his forehead, shielding his eyes. But Durril could still hear in his voice as he whispered, that he was crying.

‘Please...’ Cam begged of him. ‘Please.... Take me away from here.’

Durril gazed at him. ‘...Cam.’

‘Hey’ barked one of the sellers sitting in the seat behind the table. ‘If you’re not going to buy that then put it back.’

‘I’m sorry’ Durril said hastily, folding the invisibility cloak and placing it neatly back on the table.

The second he let go of it, the cloth became visible again, returning to its non-colour, a strange shade that could not be described. It was almost otherworldly.

The second he let go of the cloak, several of the guards around him relaxed slightly.

Durril quickly turned to Cam then, placing an arm around his shoulders and walking swiftly with him out of the courtyard.

When they found a secluded alleyway away from the crowd, Durril let go of Cam.

Cam fell to his knees, body hunched over and hand clapped over his mouth as he struggled to control his breathing, tears still shining in his eyes.

From behind him Durril watched calmly as Cam’s shoulders shook, wracked with sobs. He took out a pipe from the inside pocket of his coat and lit it, taking a deep pull, before sighing out the smoke.

‘Are you ok?’ he spoke after a time, speaking to Cam’s back.

Cam lowered his hands from his mouth, rising to stand.

‘Yes’ he whispered. ‘I’m...I’m sorry....it’s the soldiers...they scare me...’

Durril finished with his pipe, putting it out before replacing it in his inner coat pocket.

‘Come on’ Durril said. ‘We’ve got an appointment. This is a rare opportunity for you. You’re going to lead the deal. Do you think you can do it?’

‘Do *you* think I can do it?’ Cam asked him.

‘My friend’ Durril beamed. ‘I have every confidence in you.’ He slapped him on the shoulder hard to bring him around. ‘Just watch that stutter’ he informed him. ‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah’ Cam nodded. ‘I’ll try.’

A short while later they made their appointment, finding themselves in a small room. Through the many arches that surrounded them could be seen the streets beyond, where there were more stalls, more people, and more money changing hands.

Cam sat on a large green cushion on the floor with his legs crossed; behind him Durril waited on a similar cushion, and before them facing them both and waiting patiently, were their

sellers. A fat man richly dressed with a turban sat at the front, either side of him sat two younger men, slimmer though just as finely dressed; their black hair was short and handsome. And behind all three of them, was a younger woman, sitting with her head bowed. She was well dressed in orange and yellow colours, though she was not as well dressed as the others. Cam thought that perhaps this was a servant, and the younger men were the son of the fat man who sat at the front. Cam noticed that the men before him sat on dark purple cushions, the women behind them sat on a light purple cushion. Cam wondered briefly if there was some significance to these colours, but his thoughts were broken suddenly when the fat man spoke.

‘Ten thousand’ he said.

‘It’s too much’ Cam replied quickly and calmly, never missing a beat. He acted bold despite his nerves.

‘Nine and a half thousand’ the fat man said.

‘Seven thousand.’

The fat man spluttered, shocked to be offered such a low price. He consulted briefly with both of the younger men beside him, before speaking again.

‘Nine thousand two hundred.’

‘Seven thousand two hundred’ Cam mumbled, narrowing his eyes. He spoke quietly, but everyone around him heard him clearly, and the fat man was getting frustrated. *Increase slowly* Cam thought. *That is what Durril taught me.*

Behind him Durril sat in complete silence. Cam was unable to negotiate with him now, he did not have the same privileges here as the fat man did, and there were certain rules to this game that had to be followed.

Cam was on his own. But he had witnessed these meetings many times before to know how they were played; only this time, he was sitting at the front, and not the back.

‘Nine thousand’ the fat man said, glaring at him.

Cam let a silence pass before speaking, before giving his final offer. It was the rule that the seller accepted the final bid.

‘Eight thousand five hundred’ Cam said. ‘Last call.’ If the seller didn’t accept the offer now, the game was over.

‘Done’ the fat man said, and everyone in the room breathed a sigh of relief.

The fat man rose from his cushion and walked away, followed by the servant. The two younger men stayed behind to close the deal and work out the details. Durril at this point took over as Cam watched silently. The three men spoke quickly in hushed voices for about a minute before parting from each other.

‘That was well done’ Durril said loudly as the two young men walked off. ‘I’m proud of you.’

‘Was it?’ Cam asked tentatively. ‘I mean...you are?’

‘Yes!’ Durril said as if it were obvious. ‘Dear boy you need to have more confidence in yourself. You did well today, very well.’

Cam smiled then, becoming a little shy.

‘Thanks’ he said to his feet.

‘Now come’ Durril said, putting his arm around Cam’s shoulders and walking with him.

‘Let’s go collect what we’ve just spent a fortune buying.’

A short while later, and Durril and Cam were standing before a small paddock in the city, beside the two finely dressed young men who waited nearby.

‘There they are’ Durril stared proudly down at the sheep inside the paddock. ‘Beauties aren’t they?’

Cam had heard of this breed of sheep before, but he had never seen them with his own eyes. They were called Lheyart sheep. They were small, small enough to hold under one arm. Their thick wool was tightly curled, and metallic-bronze in colour. It took a very long time for the sheep to grow a full coat of wool, which was worth a fortune just for one sheep. Their wool once shorn could be made into the most beautiful garments, scarves and dresses and tail coats. The material was soft and beautiful and looked and felt like silk, but what made it more valuable, was the fact that it was so rare. These sheep were notoriously hard to breed, and their wool took a long time to grow.

‘Just seeing them...’ Durril shuddered emotionally, pretending to wipe a tear away from his eye, ‘it makes my heart soar to experience this once in a lifetime moment. Right’ he said speaking normally again and clapping his hands together. ‘Let’s get them to the carriage.’

There were seventeen sheep in total. They carried them two at a time, one beneath each arm as they made their way to the carriage that was parked a short distance away. As they went, they were overlooked by soldiers, looming over them from their stations on the rooftops and in the street around them.

Cam swallowed the lump in his throat, gritting his teeth as he walked, holding the sheep beneath his arms.

A short while later and all the sheep were loaded onto the carriage; they were given water for the journey and hay to sleep on. Durril pushed the ramp up and closed the doors, bolting the carriage shut and turning to Cam.

‘Good’ he said dusting himself down. ‘Now there is one last thing we must do.’

The next place they came to was a kennels, filled with various dogs. They were of different breeds but all were large, and many were scarred.

Durril spoke quickly to the kennel master before he vanished and returned again a short time later, with two burly dogs on the end of chains. These were older dogs, though still in their prime. Fearless and hyper alert. There were little scars all over their bodies, and both had had their ears cut, to prevent them from being torn and damaged. They had been removed at birth, like every other dog around them.

Durril paid the money for them and left, holding both the chains close to him.

‘Are you sure they’re safe?’ Cam asked Durril tentatively. ‘What if they attack us?’

‘They will only attack if they feel threatened’ Durril explained. ‘Don’t worry; they both share the same safe word.’

‘Safe word?’

‘These dogs are highly trained’ Durril said. ‘They will never attack if you use this specific word. Its different for each dog so you couldn’t guess what it is.’

‘They don’t make me feel safer’ Cam said eyeing them both with distrust.

‘We’re far safer with them than we would be without’ Durril explained, ‘especially since we’re travelling with such valuable cargo.’

‘I can’t wait until we reach our destination’ Cam grumbled, ‘and get rid of both the sheep and these dogs.’

The dogs they had were only rented; there were many establishments across the kingdoms that were all run under the same name. These dogs were only ever rented out and not sold. They were moved between the kennels across the lands by travellers who sought protection. The colossal deposit needed to obtain even one were enough incentive not to steal them. The dogs were each tied up either side of the carriage on the chains. They would run alongside the carriage as Durril's horse Sapphire would pull the carriage. Durril climbed into the seat at the head of the carriage, using the short ladder built into the side to do so. He took the reigns as Cam sat next to him. 'Ready?' Durril gleamed at him. 'Ready' Cam replied. Durril flicked the reigns lightly, and Sapphire pulled the carriage forwards. The dogs either side began to trot, as they made their way along the road.

Chapter Fifteen

'What are you going to do when you retire?' Cam asked Durril after a time. It was late, the stars were shining in the sky above their heads, and Cam and Durril sat close to the fire. Behind them Sapphire grazed, and the dogs sat still chained to the carriage, one on each side, each chewing on a raw meaty bone. 'Where did *that* come from?' Durril replied, giving Cam an amused look. 'I was just thinking' Cam said absentmindedly. 'Are you going to do this for the rest of your life? Trading and travelling the world forever?' *And what will happen to me?* 'I suppose I'll do this for as long as I can' Durril answered, 'until I find a woman I want to marry, and who wants to marry me. Then we will have tons of children and live happily ever after.' He smiled happily at the thought as Cam watched him, listening closely. And then Durril's expression dampened slightly. 'My family would love to have seen my children...'. He sighed wearily then. 'You know the home I once lived in' Durril continued sadly, 'oh....it was *beautiful*.' The fire crackled between them, and a vixen in the night called out far away, its scream echoing far. 'Why?' Cam asked him. 'Why did that happen to your family?' Durril's brow furrowed slightly, the firelight dancing in his eyes. 'It is a terrible story' Durril began. 'The strife from the capital spread towards the north, towards my hometown. The grip of the holy men is tightening on the world. They get rid of anyone who to them seems unfit to live. Heathens, people who are born disfigured, simpletons, people in other religions....gypsies...' Cam's heart tightened in his chest as he listened.

‘They came to the house’ Durril spoke in a dead tone. ‘They...attacked my family...they...burned my father alive.....and my mother who put up a fight...I...saw everything...and my sister.....they...they....*raped her*....’

Durril turned away, going silent for a moment, before looking back.

‘I was forced to watch the whole thing’ Durril continued. ‘I...was only able to escape by the skin of my teeth when...they were distracted when they were...torturing my younger brother.....they....*burned out his eyes*.....’

Oh god Cam realised with horror. *I've caused this to happen!* He turned away from Durril, feeling sick. *How many others have suffered because of me?*

‘I was able to escape’ Durril mumbled. ‘I hide for hours in a place where they would never find me. I returned days later. I took a horse and a carriage...and escaped.’ He looked behind him to Sapphire standing beside the carriage. ‘They belonged to my mother’ Durril said. ‘My mother built this carriage from scratch herself. And the horse, she raised herself from a foal, trained her, broke her...their bond was strong...’

‘Have you ever had a horse of your own?’ Cam asked him, trying to change the subject.

‘Yes’ Durril said. ‘But...I had to leave him behind. Whiplash was his name.’ He smiled weakly. ‘He was too young for me to take. I had to leave in a hurry and...he would only have been a liability. He wasn’t broken in...still just a baby....’

There was a hoot of an owl nearby, and fluttering though the sky above them were several bats.

Cam and Durril listened to their quiet chirps, each lost in their own thoughts.

‘My family...’ Cam volunteered, ‘my father died when I was young. An illness I think, my brother and I were never really told what happened to him but.....he was sick a lot, and was unwell for a long time before he passed away.’

‘It’s not an easy thing’ Durril nodded.

‘Growing up was hard’ Cam said. ‘My brother and I stuck together. Our mother didn’t really care for us...and in the end...I....had to escape.’

‘I wouldn’t forget about your brother if I were you’ Durril advised, ‘especially if you had a strong bond. After all...family is all we have.’

‘How can you be so happy’ Cam asked him suddenly, ‘when so much bad has happened in your life?’

Durril smiled sadly.

‘Life is hard’ he answered, ‘but we have to make the best of all things, or else every one of us will sink into a pit of misery.’ He tilted his head at Cam, his black hair falling over his face.

‘You cannot move forwards when you look back’ He turned towards the fire again. ‘I loved my family very much, they meant the world to me...but I wish to remember how they lived...not how they died. I prefer to remember the good moments we had...how we laughed...how we smiled...’

He sighed then, reaching for his instrument.

‘Come on’ he said to Cam, ‘let’s play. This night is too silent.’

The next morning they set off early. Cam sat beside Durril in the driver’s seat, hugging his cloak tightly to him and yawning loudly.

‘You could have a nap you know’ Durril suggested.

‘But what about you?’

‘I’ll drive for a few hours; then you take over.’

‘We’re coming to the canyons aren’t we?’ Cam asked.

‘Yeah’ Durril replied seriously. ‘We are.’

The canyons were a dangerous place to be. It was the reason they had taken two dogs with them instead of one. They would have taken three if they could afford it. The canyons were a main travelling route between several cities, and it was by this route that many merchants came through.

It was because of this that the canyons had become a favourite hotspot for bandits. The canyons could be avoided altogether if necessary, but the alternative paths were a round trip of several hundred miles, and generally the merchants just didn’t have much time. If it took too long to get something somewhere, then the buyers would have moved on and the merchants would be forced to sell to anyone they could for a vastly reduced price.

Though the canyons were perilous, they were the most practical route to travel.

‘We won’t reach them for a while’ Durril told Cam quietly. ‘Why don’t you have a rest?’

‘How long does it take to travel through the canyons?’ Cam asked him.

‘About a day.’

‘When do we reach them?’

‘In about six hours or so.’

Cam’s eyelids drooped; he was exhausted, having spent most of the previous night playing.

‘Alright’ he sighed. ‘I’ll rest...just for a little while.’

When he woke next, they were travelling through the canyons.

Cam tensed, recognising the environment around them.

‘It’s alright’ Durril told him hastily, ‘everything been quiet so far.’

Cam sat back in his seat, forcing himself to relax slightly, though keeping his guard up.

The carriage trundled onwards along the straight and even road, the clip clop of Sapphire’s hooves continued, as the dogs either side of the carriage padded alongside them. Cam could hear the miniature sheep shuffling about in the carriage behind them.

It was several hours later, when they saw their first bandit.

Durril tensed suddenly, seeing a lone figure sitting atop a horse and looming over them at the head of the cliff.

‘Cam’ Durril hissed, jabbing him in the ribs with an elbow.

Cam was suddenly alert, staring wide eyed up at the figure.

He noticed Durril’s expression then. Durril was looking in the opposite direction. Cam turned his head the other way, seeing on the other side of the canyon on the cliffs above them, two more figures on horses.

‘Oh gods...’ Cam whispered.

Durril turned then, rising to his feet and facing the road behind him where several men on horseback approached, riding at a canter.

‘What are we going to do?!’ Cam cried.

‘Don’t panic’ Durril told him calmly. He reached to the side of the carriage, releasing the clasp that tied the dog to the carriage, before turning the other way, leaning over Cam’s lap and stretching to reach the other clasp, releasing the second dog.

The dogs were alert, prancing around with tails up and heads held back. They both headed towards the back of the carriage where the bandits approached from, picking up their pace and quickly closing the distance, before lunging up at the horses, causing them to rear up in terror screaming, many of them throwing their riders from their back.

Cam’s eyes darted away from the riders behind them and back to the cliffs above, seeing in horror that the figures that had stood there, where now gone.

He rose swiftly to his feet, his attention darting now right ahead of them, where there were more riders approaching.

‘They’re trapping us!’ Cam cried as the bandits formed a wall with their bodies, picking up their pace and spurring their horses onwards.

Durril was hardly listening, he stood on the roof of the carriage with a bow, the string drawn back as he fired arrows one after the other at the men that swarmed around them.

But the men wore armour and helmets, prepared for such an attack. The arrows just bounced off them. Durril threw down his bow angrily, cursing loudly.

‘Durril?’ Cam’s voice wavered.

Cam suddenly noticed a figure appear to the side of them, seemingly coming from nowhere, a mounted figure with his face concealed and a whip in his hand.

Cam automatically threw his arm up to defend himself as the bandit lashed out at him. The whip curled around his arm, and the bandit kicked his horse away, jerking Cam off the carriage. Cam stumbled, falling to the ground. Stricken with terror, he was dragged by several hands away from the carriage, away from Durril.

Durril instantly grabbed the reins, jerking them sharply back and causing the carriage to skid to a halt.

‘Let go!’ Cam screamed in horror.

The bandits only obeyed when his skin began to glow. Leaping back in shock and speaking in a foreign tongue to one another at the spectacle.

One of the bandits called out suddenly, and the men around them stopped the attack. Cam threw his head back, up to the cliffs above them where he saw a whole host of men standing in a row and aiming bows and arrows at the bandits on the ground.

But these men were different. They were not bandits, but dressed in bright colours.

‘Leave now!’ one of the men above them called down to the bandits. ‘Leave now or we kill you all!’

‘You cannot hurt us with arrows!’ one of the bandits called back.

‘We could come down to you if you like’ the archer offered to him speaking loudly, his voice faint due to the distance between them. ‘We’d be happy to introduce you to our swords. We outnumber you by the way’ he added almost as an afterthought.

The bandit cursed in his foreign language, turning towards Durril and speaking in English.

‘Call your dogs off and we’ll leave.’

Durril called the dogs to his side, using the safe word ‘cactus’ to draw them to him. The dogs who had previously been fighting with several of the men a short distance away turned their

tails and ran back to Durril with loyalty unwavering, as if he had cared for them their entire lives.

Some of the bandit's horses had fallen, their riders jumping up behind other riders nearby and galloping away. In a matter of mere seconds, the bandits were all gone, like wisps of cloud. If it were not for the fallen horses left behind, it would be as if they had never come at all.

Durril leapt down from the carriage, helping Cam to his feet and dusting him off.

'Are you alright?' he asked Cam.

'Y-yeah' Cam said, trembling slightly. 'I'll be fine.' As he spoke, the glow began to fade away, and he returned to his normal appearance.

Durril turned towards the new figures that had overlooked them. The archers had put away their bows and were climbing down the steep hillside to reach them.

Durril's expression broke into a wide smile as they drew closer, recognition crossing his face as several approached him.

'Zale! Stiggur! Mander!' he cried throwing his arms out.

'Who are they?' Cam mumbled, shuffling up behind him.

'My brothers' Durril said proudly.

Cam watched the figures as they each moved forwards to embrace Durril. They wore the same gypsy clothes as he Cam saw, though their faces looked nothing alike.

'They look nothing like you' Cam mentioned quietly.

'Some of us share different mothers' Durril said clapping Cam heartily on the back, his demeanour back to its regular self after the incident, though Cam was still a bit shaken.

'Some of us share the same fathers' Durril went on, 'but we all share the same blood.' His attention drifted them towards other figures that approached them. 'My sisters!' Durril cried.

'Loiza! Kizzy! Florica!' he embraced each of the beautiful women in turn; then moved off into the crowd that had slowly gathered around them. 'My family!' Durril said. 'Thank you all for saving us.'

'It's good to see you again brother' said one of the men, grasping Durril by the arm.

'Likewise' Durril beamed.

'Who's this?' one of the women said sidling up to Cam and stroking his arm seductively. 'He's handsome.'

'I picked him up as a stray' Durril beamed merrily, grabbing Cam and hugging him playfully.

'He's my travelling companion, and my loyal friend.'

'What do you have in here?' one of the younger men asked, climbing up to the side of the carriage. 'Good lord, are those Lheyart sheep? They're worth a fortune!'

'We're selling them' Durril informed them all. 'We were hoping to get through this place before we were found by bandits. Its lucky you were here.'

'Not luck' one of his brothers said, 'we knew you would be coming this way soon. We kept a lookout for you.'

'My family' Durril sighed happily. 'How lucky I am to have you.'

Cam climbed back into the seat at the head of the carriage, sitting beside Durril as he walked Sapphire onwards along the canyon and to a secluded area, where the other gypsies who now accompanied them had set up camp. Luckily, Cam realised as they made their way onwards, none of them, friend or foe, had been badly hurt.

Durril slowed the carriage to a stop, unhooking Sapphire and tightening the dogs to the carriage. He then took his place amongst his family.

Cam jumped down from the carriage, walking into the crowd between the other carriages after Durril. He was given a welcome as warm as the one that Durril received. They immediately treated him as if he were one of their own.

That night, they celebrated their reunion with a gala.

The women danced around the fires, and the men played the most beautiful melodies to accompany them. Cam played on his flute alongside Durril, until Durril was pulled away by a woman. Shortly after that, a woman approached Cam.

She slipped the flute away from his fingers, gently pushing him back against the rock so that he leant on his back against the slope of the canyon wall.

She straddled him, lifting her skirt as she did so.

Cam stared at her nervously, eyes flickering up to hers.

She lifted something towards him. It was a long and thin pipe, slowly smoking at one end.

She drew it close to his mouth, indicating for him to take a pull. Cam glanced at the other gypsies celebrating around him, seeing that many others had the same pipes from which they were smoking from.

‘Try it’ the gypsy woman purred seductively. ‘You might be surprised.’

Cam placed his mouth around the end of the pipe, breathing in deeply.

The effects were instantaneous. He felt suddenly as if he were tipping back, the sky overhead began to spin and his stomach tightened.

His pupils dilated until they were huge, and as he turned his head to the side, he saw one of the horse’s legs had lost all its bones. It moved along the ground now as an octopus did, its head sliding across the ground as it slithered between the other gypsies, who were blending in with the rocks around them. It climbed up the side of one of the nearby carriages, oozing its way across the roof, and away. And for some reason, this did not alarm Cam; in fact, it did not bother him in any way.

He laid his head back as the woman straddling him, taking a pull from the pipe herself, began to slowly unbutton his shirt.

Cam let out a groan as she ran her hands across his naked chest, leaning forward and beginning to kiss his face, trailing her kisses down his neck and to his chest.

Cam barely felt her touch, barely felt her kisses. In his mind he was far away.

The stars descended around him, great balls of light hovering in the air and beginning to slowly spin around him. The figures around him faded away until he was surrounded by only black, and the great balls of light, floating in the air.

Cam woke the next morning when Durril shook him firmly.

His voice was distant at first, as if he were speaking underwater. It gradually became clearer.

Cam opened his eyes, blinking wearily in the bright light.

‘Finally!’ Durril said as Cam’s vision focused on him. ‘I thought for a minute there that you would never wake. Are you alright?’

Cam pushed himself up, groaning and holding his head.

‘Looks like you had a good time’ he sniggered. ‘Did you try the Snap?’

Cam raised his head to gaze at Durril.

‘It was good wasn’t it?’ Durril encouraged.

Cam groaned again.

He glanced down at himself, noticing his trousers were unbuttoned and his shirt open.

‘Snap was not the only thing enjoyed last night’ Durril said giving him a wink as Cam hastily covered himself up again. ‘Come on’ he said, patting his shoulder and pulling him to his feet. ‘Let’s go get some breakfast.’

As Cam sat by the fire, nibbling feebly at his breakfast, he watched Durril laughing and talking with his brothers and sisters. He felt a lonely pang in his heart then, thinking again of his own brother.

Luke. What are you doing now? Are you safe? Are you happy? And Valery....

Durril put his arm around the gypsy beside him, whispering something secret into his ear. The gypsy listened, laughing heartily at whatever he had just been told and shoving Durril playfully back.

Is this my life from now on? Cam thought to himself. Will I never see my own brother and Valery again?

When breakfast was over, Cam and Durril tended to their sheep, cleaning out the dirty hay and replacing it with clean hay, feeding them and giving them fresh water. The dogs were fed and Sapphire tended to. Before they left, Durril returned to the carriage again, picking up two sheep and carrying them out of the carriage.

‘These are for you’ Durril said to one of his brothers, handing them to him, ‘as a thank you for helping us the other day.’

‘Your gifts are well received’ his brother said, gratefully taking the sheep from under his arms. ‘Thank you very much.’

Durril climbed onto the carriage again, taking his seat beside Cam and waving at the others before setting off.

‘Farewell my family!’ he called to them. ‘I look forward to when next we meet!’

He snapped the reins and Sapphire pulled the carriage, picking up her pace to a trot.

The rest of their journey was peaceful, enjoyable even. Cam breathed a sigh of relief when they left the canyons behind them, and shortly after that, they reached their destination.

They found their buyer, sold the sheep and collected their money. Then they went to another man, giving back the protection dogs they had rented and collecting their deposit.

‘A fine day’ Durril was saying, sifting through the bulging bag of coins, ‘a fine day indeed. We’ve made quite a pretty penny’ he winked, swinging the bag before Cam’s face hypnotically. ‘Now, there is one last thing we must do’ he said.

‘What’s that?’

‘We’ve got to go back to collect my carriage. *My carriage. My home where all my stuff is.* Come along Sapphire’ he sang jovially, leading the horse through the streets. ‘Let’s take you home.’

Cam hurried after him, jogging to catch up.

The three of them walked side by side down the street, Cam, Durril and Sapphire.

Together they made their way home.

Chapter Sixteen

‘Eggs?’ Cam said doubtfully. ‘We came here for eggs.’

It was many days later, and they had travelled far in that time. Now they had come to a little village, a tranquil and peaceful place.

‘Hey’ Durril said defensively as Cam gave him a comical look. ‘Sometimes a man just wants the simple things in life.’ He plucked an egg from the coop, tossing in the air before catching it again. ‘Hey!’ he called to the old man nearby. ‘How much for this egg?’

‘Hm? Oh. You can have it’ the man said with disinterest before moving on.

‘Now if that isn’t a good deal I don’t know what is’ Durril chuckled. He turned to Cam, waving the egg in the air before his face. ‘Want to split it?’

‘No you can have it’ Cam told him. ‘I don’t like eggs all that much.’

‘Your loss.’ He grabbed Cam around the shoulders roughly then, shaking him in a playful manner. ‘Come on’ he said happily. ‘Let’s go back to the carriage. Sapphire needs feeding.’

Cam walked with him, gazing at the small village around them, the open fields, the thatched houses, the animals, some of which wandered free, and the people who all dressed in simple, practical clothes.

It was a nice place Cam decided, and a happy one.

‘Are you daydreaming again?’ Durril asked him ruffling his hair.

‘N-no’ Cam grumbled shrinking away from him. ‘Please don’t do that.’

‘Oh don’t be so sour.’

Durril sauntered over towards his carriage where Sapphire waited, tossing the egg up in the air and catching it over and over again, whistling as he went.

‘Hey Cam!’ he called over his shoulder. ‘Are you coming?’

Cam stared back at a group of young women, hanging together like wolves in a pack and smiling at him, whispering amongst themselves and waving.

Cam jerked his head away from them, his stomach tightening and flipping over nervously.

He ran after Durril, jogging to catch him up.

‘Those girls seem to like you’ Durril noted with a glint in his eye. ‘Maybe you should go and introduce yourself.’

‘No I...I don’t think....I don’t know...’

‘Have you ever been with a woman before?’ Durril asked suddenly rounding on him. ‘Have you ever been *in love*?’

Cam stared at Durril uncertainly.

Brioke caressed him, leaning forward and kissing him, moving his lips down his neck as Cam turned his head away. Brioke grabbed Cam’s wrist with one hand, pinning him against the wall, with the other hand, he moved to touch his groin.

Cam swallowed the lump in his throat, trying hard to forget the memory and push it to the back of his mind.

'I've never known love' Cam mumbled. 'I don't even know what it feels like.'

'Why don't you talk to one of the girls?' Durril asked him, speaking more seriously now. 'It could be the start of something new.'

'I'm too nervous' Cam answered reluctantly.

'It's nice' Durril pressed. 'Being in love... and being loved.'

Cam stared at the ground between them.

'Come on' Durril sighed relenting and moving away again. 'Let's have breakfast.'

As they sat around the fire waiting for the sausages to cook, Cam played his flute, as Durril beside him poked one of the sausages.

'Mmmm. Smell that. Isn't that delicious?'

Cam lowered his flute.

'You're getting good you know' Durril said, indicating the flute. 'I might even go so far as to say you're almost as good as me.'

'Well...' Cam mumbled, 'I've had a lot of practice' he answered, 'and a good teacher.'

'Oh' Durril waved him away in a deliberately feminine fashion. 'You're too kind.'

He stabbed the sausages and divided them evenly between two plates, handing one to Cam and keeping one himself. He then began to cook the one egg.

'Are you sure you don't want an egg?' Durril asked him, poking the single egg. 'I could go and squeeze a chicken?'

'No thanks' Cam replied, smiling at the thought of Durril battling with a chicken.

'Blood pie?' Durril offered, tossing several slices of black pudding into the pan.

'Please' Cam said.

Once it was cooked, Durril shared the black pudding between them. Cam blew on his breakfast to cool it, before cutting it up into tiny pieces and beginning to eat.

'So when are we going to leave?' Cam spoke up after a time.

'Why?' Durril asked him. 'Are you desperate to leave here?'

'I just wonder why we came. Who are we going to trade with in this small village?'

'Sometimes it's nice to just have a break' Durril beamed, seemingly very pleased with himself. 'I've been thinking, there are some beautiful shores towards the south east, the view of the sun when it sets is the most beautiful in the entire kingdom. The sea is always calm and as still as glass that glistens like a thousand jewels...or so they say.' A slow smile spread across his face at the thought. 'There are dolphins that play there in the gentle waters every evening...or so they say, and once every year, great whales come to the shores to feed. They leap out of the waters, throwing themselves back as they fall, but the water is always calm. It is the most beautiful spectacle...or so they say.'

'You talk about it as if you've not been there.'

'I haven't.' Durril smirked. 'It's silly I know. I've spent my entire life travelling...even before I was born and... I have never been to that place which is the most beautiful. I don't know why...I just never really got around to it. Strange.' He continued to eat.

'And you want to go to these shores?' Cam asked him.

'I'm thinking...it would be nice, maybe later this year...or next year. One day...'

'It really does sound like a nice place.'

'Yeah' Durril mumbled under his breath. 'It does.'

'So where are you planning on heading after this?'

Durril heaved a heavy sigh, leaning back where he sat.

'I have some fine silks in the carriage. They will fetch the highest price if we go to the shores in the east. I know a few potential buyers.'

Cam glanced up then at Sapphire who was tied to a post near the carriage, head lowered as she pulled at the grass.

'I was thinking of breeding her soon' Durril said distractedly as he saw Cam watching the mare. 'There are several stallions my family own that are suitable, but I have to find them first. They could be anywhere.' He smirked. 'My family' he sighed shaking his head happily, '...they do like to travel.'

'It's even more reason to leave' Cam said to him, trying to sound casual.

Durril just laughed.

'She is a magnificent horse' he said, admiring the beast. 'She would bear the most beautiful foals.'

Durril reached for the pack at his side then, pulling from it his flute.

He glanced towards Cam.

'Are you ready?'

Cam reached for his own flute, bringing it to his lips.

Together they played a tune. The beautiful melody caused people to stop what they were doing, listening as they played.

By the time they finished their song, a small crowd had gathered, and as they lowered the flutes from their lips, the people began to clap.

Cam glanced about him nervously with his head bowed. Durril only smiled, seeming to relish in the attention.

'We should get going soon' Cam said again to Durril, speaking with uncertainty in his voice.

'Why?' Durril asked. 'I rather like it here.'

Cam glanced timidly behind him at a group of women who had him in their sights.

'They're watching me again' Cam hissed under his breath.

'It's because you're so handsome' Durril winked at him.

'You...think that?'

'Well sure' Durril shrugged.

Cam looked down, feeling dejected.

'Why...have you done so much for me?' Cam began uncertainly. 'No one in my life has ever been so kind.'

'We share this world with many other people' Durril said. 'What kind of a place would this be if we didn't care for each other?'

'And...'

Cam asked, for the second time, 'what do you want in return?'

'I told you already' Durril replied simply. 'I want nothing.'

Later that day, when Durril and Cam were alone, Cam spoke to him.

'I've been thinking' Cam began uncertainly; 'that...we've spent a lot of time together...and...I'm sure you wanted something in return.'

‘What do you mean?’ Durril said. ‘I already told you.’

I know Cam thought desperately in his mind. *But your words make no sense...*

‘This world is cruel’ Cam moaned. ‘There are no good people in this world. Everyone wants *something*.’

‘Cam’ Durril frowned, worry etched in every line in his face. ‘What are you talking about?’

Cam raised his head.

‘You can have me if you want.’

‘What?’ Durril breathed, in shock and disbelief at what he thought he heard.

Cam moved closer to Durril, and kissed him.

Durril’s eyes widened. He pushed Cam back firmly, hand going to his mouth.

‘What are you doing?!’

‘I...’ Cam hesitated, ‘thought you wanted me...’

‘What...?’ Durril gasped.

He froze suddenly. Durril lowered his hand, staring at Cam hard.

‘Oh’ he said at last, ‘you mean you...’ He went silent for a moment; Cam could almost see the cogs turning in his head. ‘Oh’ he said again. ‘I think I see now...’

That evening, Durril packed away his things, preparing the carriage and making sure all of Sapphire’s harnesses were in place.

He climbed into the driver’s seat and snapped the reins.

Cam was elsewhere when this was happening, and he only caught Durril as he was making his way down the road, riding out of the small village, and leaving Cam behind.

‘Where are you going?’ Cam called out to him, running to catch him up.

Durril pulled the reins, causing Sapphire to stop suddenly.

He turned to Cam with a sad smile. There was no warmth in his eyes.

‘I have to leave here’ Durril spoke in a deadpan voice, ‘I think I’ve stayed too long.’

‘We’ve only just arrived.’

‘I still think I’ve stayed too long’ he repeated.

‘You’re going to leave me here?’ Cam asked incredulous.

Durril gritted his teeth, Cam saw the vein in his forehead pulse, the way he grasped the reins firmly in both hands.

He was reluctant in his words.

‘I’ve come to realise’ Durril spoke very carefully, ‘...we just want different things...’

‘But...’ Cam uttered, feeling a lump in his throat, ‘why are you *leaving* me here?’

‘You must make your own path’ Durril said. ‘That ring you gave me before, the one you had when I found you; I’ve given it to a family who live at the edge of this village. They’ve taken it as payment to care for you.’

Cam remembered the ring, he had given it to Durril to help pay for supplies, but Durril had never gotten around to selling it.

‘You’ve...’ Cam began distraught, ‘...sold me?’

‘They have a green door’ Durril continued as he if had not heard, snapping the reins as he spoke. The carriage moved onwards. ‘There is a small vegetable patch right before their house!’ Durril called out to him as he moved away. ‘You’ll see it! It’s hard to miss!’

'I'm sorry' Cam called after him. 'Whatever I've done I'm sorry.'

'We've spent enough time together' Durril spoke loudly as the carriage trundled along. 'It's time we went our separate ways.' He looked back at Cam one last time. 'It was nice knowing you' he finished in a quiet voice, though Cam heard every word loud and clear.

He snapped the reins again; Sapphire tossed her head energetically, picking up her pace to a trot.

Cam watched deep regret as Durril rode out of his life forever. He didn't move from that spot, until Durril was so far away, he could no longer see him.

He felt within him, sudden loss and loneliness.

He hadn't realised how much he had cared for Durril, until he was gone.

Cam turned to the side, seeing his bag; the bag Durril had given him, left on the ground near the road, out in the open where it could easily be found.

Cam went over to it, rifling through. In it he found the rest of his clothes, the brightly coloured clothes Durril had given him, his bandanas, a tin of black paint he used to paint his eyes, and his flute.

Cam lifted the bag, slinging it over his shoulder and gritting his teeth in determination, glaring at everything around him and blinking rapidly to hold back the tears.

I'm so sorry Durril...I'm so sorry...

He trudged to the edge of the village, looking all about him as he went.

He found the cottage with the green door, the vegetable patch right before it.

Cam swallowed nervously. He lifted the bag higher up his shoulder, and reluctantly stepped forward.

He knocked on the door, taking a step back and waiting.

His breath was short, and his palms sweated and itched.

He resisted the urge to scratch them, instead giving all of his concentration on the door, glaring at the wood and wishing the door would open, at the same time, wishing it would stay shut.

It opened, and a mature man stood before him.

'You must be Cam' the man said immediately. 'Come on in. We've got a room for you upstairs.'

Cam stepped tentatively into the small cottage, gazing about him wide-eyed.

‘The ring that gypsy gave us is a fine one indeed’ the man went on, closing the door after him. ‘It will see us well fed for months to come. Quite a fine piece it is I must say.’

‘Yes’ Cam mumbled distractedly, hardly even listening. ‘Yes of course.’

‘I do wonder where he got it from’ the man smiled. ‘It doesn’t matter I suppose. I’ll sell it as soon as I can.’

Cam entered the kitchen, it was a very small room, there were only three small rooms downstairs.

‘Let me introduce you’ the man said. ‘I am Joe. This is my wife Beatrice’ he indicated a woman of about the same age as him as she entered the kitchen through a door on the other side, ‘and my two sons, Henry and Wallace.’

The young men both looked up from the table at which they sat. They looked about the same age as Cam.

‘This is your home now’ the man said to him, the man who had introduced himself as Joe. ‘You can stay here for several months, or until you find a place of your own. We expect your help around the farm, we’ve all got to eat, and if you have any questions then please ask me now.’

Cam stared at him, feeling nervous as the others stared at him back expectantly.

Cam felt naked under their gaze.

‘Well?’ the man prompted.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Do you have any questions?’ Joe repeated.

‘N-no.’

‘Fine.’ He turned to one of his sons. ‘Henry, can you show him to his room please?’

Many weeks later

Cam sat in his tiny bedroom, the bedroom that was now his, staring out of the tiny window at the thatched cottages outside.

The room was no larger than a cupboard, with the bed taking up nearly all of the available space. A set of drawers for his clothes took up the rest of the space, though Cam used only one draw, having very few possessions.

He stared down at the flute on his lap. He played it rarely nowadays, most of the time he just looked at it. It was nothing more than an ornament now.

In the time that he had been here, Cam had shed his bright clothes, the clothes he had been given by Durril. He now dressed like everyone else, in plain clothes, dark clothes, clothes which were the opposite in every single way to the ones he used to wear when he travelled with Durril.

He found himself missing those days. He missed the carriage, the new views around him he woke to almost every morning. He missed the white and black horse Sapphire, with her long flowing mane and tail. But most of all, he missed Durril.

Cam touched a hand to his own face, feeling the flesh beneath his eye. He wore no eyeliner, not anymore.

And Durril had been right. It had begun to feel strange not wearing it at first, but without Durril, and living on the farm as he did, he no longer needed it anymore.

Now, he lived a new life. Twice this had happened since he left the palace, first when he had been found by Durril, and now.

‘Cam!’

Cam straightened slightly, raising his head towards the door, through which had come the muffled voice. Cam recognised it as one of the sons.

‘We need your help’ Wallace called. ‘Can you come down here?’

Cam put his flute aside, rising from the bed and moving to the door.

He went downstairs where Wallace was waiting for him.

‘Good, there you are’ Wallace smiled. ‘I need your help to corral the horses.’

‘Oh’ Cam said quietly. ‘I’m not very good at that stuff.’

‘I know’ he sighed wearily. ‘I would ask someone else but everyone is busy right now. So I need *your* help.’

An hour or so later, Cam was sitting in the dirt holding his bleeding head in his hands, pressing the area where the horse had kicked him.

‘Honestly’ Wallace was saying shaking his head. ‘How are you so useless?’

‘I don’t mean to be’ Cam mumbled back still holding himself.

‘Perhaps we should find something else for you to do?’ Wallace said to himself, looking about him as he thought.

‘Perhaps I should just sit here’ Cam suggested, feeling the sharp pain in his head, so fresh.

‘No’ Wallace spoke sharply. ‘Work needs to be done. You’ve got to earn your keep. That ring won’t pay for you forever. Come on. Even my own parents would kick me out if I didn’t pull my weight.’

He grabbed Cam by the arm and pulled him up; Cam flinched as he did this, his heart skipping as he felt the same old fear of being touched.

But as soon as Cam was on his feet, Wallace let him go, and Cam breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Come on’ Wallace said again, brushing the dust harshly from the front of Cam’s shirt where he had fallen. ‘Let’s go find you something manageable to do.’

A short while later, Cam stood before the paddock where the cows were gathered, with Wallace standing beside him. Cam still felt a little dizzy and a bit sick. But the bleeding from the injury on his head had stopped, and his head was bandaged now.

‘What do you mean you don’t know how to milk a cow?’ Wallace was saying. ‘Jeez what is the *matter* with you?’ he sighed, brushing his hair back in exasperation. ‘Were you raised in a palace or something?’

Cam baulked. His stomach flipped over and he became suddenly nervous. He turned away sharply and began to fumble.

‘No! I mean...I just....its...it’s not...I mean....’

Wallace turned to him then, giving him a look of scrutiny.

‘I am very curious to know more about you. You were travelling with a gypsy, but you are clearly *not* a gypsy. You are not a farmer, or any type of common folk. Who are you really? And where did you come from?’

Cam gritted his teeth nervously, unsure how best to respond.

‘I bet you're the son of some important lord or something’ Wallace said waving away as he turned back to face the cows. ‘Let me guess, your father tried to force you to marry someone you didn’t want? Or something like that?’

Cam’s attention flickered reluctantly back at Wallace.

‘Well’ Wallace sighed, ‘wherever you’ve come from, it’s obvious to everyone you’ve come from a wealthy background. I sure hope it was worth it, running away from home and all that. Or maybe you were cast out. Who knows?’ he shrugged, looking back to Cam who had said nothing.

Wallace frowned at Cam in mild irritation.

‘Would you like some help?’ he offered.

Before Cam could answer, Wallace turned behind him and called to a figure that was working nearby.

‘Elaina!’

The young woman looked up from what she was doing.

‘Come over here for a minute!’ Wallace said waving to her.

As she approached, Cam got a better look at the young woman. She was a small figure, with brown hair cut into a bob. She had pale skin and dark eyes, dressed in plain clothes like so many of the women who lived in this village; she would have blended in well with a crowd. The woman stopped before Cam, holding her hands behind her back and averting her gaze shyly.

‘Elaina’ Wallace said in a bored tone. ‘Cam here doesn’t know how to milk a cow. Could you show him please? I’m very busy.’

Elaina’s eyes flickered up at Cam’s then, before turning back towards Wallace.

‘I’m actually quite busy myself.’

‘Don’t care’ Wallace droned. ‘Just help him once and I’ll be grateful. It won’t take long I’m sure’ he said beginning to walk away, ‘or maybe it will’ he added under his breath. ‘Anyway, I’ll make it worth your trouble later!’

Cam and Elaina stared at his back as he stormed off.

Elaina turned to Cam uncertainly, and he reluctantly glanced back to her.

‘We...pay each other in favours here’ Elaina explained, ‘it’s a small village and everyone knows everyone.’ She smiled. ‘There is so much work to be done around here.’

She paused, waiting for Cam to speak. When he didn’t she went on.

‘What is your name? I’ve seen you about, but I’ve never had the chance to talk to you before.’

‘I...’ Cam said to the floor. ‘Cam’ he said. ‘It’s Cam.’

‘I’m Elaina’ she said. ‘Where did you come from?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it’ Cam answered shortly.

‘Oh, ok...sorry...’

‘You’re not like the others’ Cam mentioned.

‘What do you mean?’

Just as Cam was about to speak, he noticed several woman sitting on a wall nearby. They were all watching him, giggling amongst themselves and pointing.

Elaina glanced around, seeing them before turning back to him.

‘Oh’ she said. ‘You mean I’m not like *them*?’

‘I...I guess.....’

‘I don’t like them’ Elaina said peering over her shoulder at them again. ‘They’re lazy. They never do any work, and somehow they always get away with it.’

‘That’s very unfair’ Cam mumbled.

Elaina shrugged nonchalantly. ‘I stopped caring years ago. They are all bitches.’

Cam started then, not expecting such a thing to be said by her.

‘Their parents are important people’ Elaina explained. ‘Even in this small village we have such folk. They don’t need to work. I suppose if I didn’t have to, I’d be the same as them. But I’m glad I’m not. They’re all spoilt.’

‘Oh.’

‘Hey!’ a voice shouted at them in the distance.

Cam and Elaina both glanced around.

‘You haven’t got all day!’ Wallace called to them. ‘Get on with it!’

‘Come on’ Elaina mumbled, moving away and keeping her head down, ignoring the young women as they giggled again, this time mockingly. ‘I’ll show you how to do it; then I’ve got to go. I’ve got other things to do.’

Cam did his job well enough Elaina told him. As soon as she thought he could manage on his own, she left. It seemed to Cam that she couldn’t wait to get away. He didn’t mind. He wanted to be on his own anyway, and especially didn’t want to be bothered by any women, not even her.

He hated how they watched him, and felt extremely uncomfortable beneath their gaze. It felt like they were hunting him.

What do they want?

Cam had asked Elaina why they stared at him like they did, but all he got in response was a string of curses aimed at the woman. It was clear she despised them.

Cam spoke little after that. It was only a short time Elaina was with him before she left. Now he was alone.

Cam worked quickly, filling the pales before carrying them over to the shed on a yolk.

One of the woman in the group that huddled together, slid off the wall, following him from a distance.

Cam put the buckets down in the shed, rubbing his aching shoulders and groaning as he straightened up, tilting his head back and forth as the bones in his neck clicked.

He tensed suddenly, whipping his head around as he heard a sound behind him.

The young woman that had followed smiled. ‘You’re very jumpy.’

‘I’m sorry’ Cam averted his eyes and backed away.

‘For what?’

He looked up at her again.

‘You’re very interesting’ she purred.

‘Am I?’

‘Of course you are’ she said gliding around him and coming to sit on a stack of wood piled neatly beside them, tucking the skirt of her dress beneath her as she sat. ‘You appeared so suddenly here in this little village. I wonder who you really are. Where did you come from?’

‘I.....’ Cam looked away.

‘Are you shy?’

He looked back.

‘There’s no need to be shy. I won’t hurt you.’

Cam was sure these words were meant to comfort him. But they did the exact opposite.

‘What do you want?’ Cam asked her.

The woman visibly faltered at that. She seemed to try a different tact.

‘My name is Catrin’ she said to him.

She stopped talking, and Cam suddenly realised she was waiting for him to speak.

‘Oh’ he said at last.

Catrin considered him for a moment, pursing her lips. Cam didn’t like it; he didn’t understand what he saw in her gaze.

She rose from her place then, moving over towards him.

Cam flinched as she reached out to touch him. He squeezed his eyes tight shut, before opening them again.

‘One might think that someone hit you’ Catrin spoke quietly, reaching closer towards him, moving gradually.

Cam drew a slow intake of breath as he felt her caress his cheek. He was backed against the wall now, leaning into it, willing himself to be disappear through it and escape.

He balled his fists.

‘It’s alright’ Catrin spoke calmly. ‘I won’t hurt you.’

She stepped closer to him again. Cam’s eyes widened as she leant forwards, pressing her lips against his.

Brioke leant forwards, taking Cams’ head in his hands and holding as he kissed him deeply. Cam cringed inwardly as he felt Brioke inside of him.

Cam suddenly shoved her back, glaring at her with tears in his eyes.

‘Don’t touch me!’

Catrin stared at him in utter shock, horrified at the way he had acted.

Cam left the shed as quickly as he could.

He ran away, finding a place that was hidden away and quiet.

He thought he was alone as he leant against the wall, in the narrow space between two buildings, hand pressed firmly against the cool wood of the barn, his arm shaking. But there was another there with him, she approached.

‘Got to you did they?’

Cam wheeled around, glaring and blinking the tears quickly from his eyes.

Elaina regarded him with a level expression. Cam wasn’t sure what it was. Was she mocking him, perhaps finding his torment amusing?

‘What do *you* want?’ Cam snapped, turning sharply away and glaring angrily at the floor.

He gritted his teeth, finding it suddenly hard to breathe; he felt a lump in his throat and experienced a sudden pain in his chest.

Cam grimaced, the edges of his eyes quivering as he fought to control himself.

‘I told you about them’ Elaina said to him calmly. ‘They are like wolves.’

‘Why?’ Cam gasped looking back at her at last. ‘What do they *want*?’

‘You’ Elaina replied. ‘Isn’t it obvious?’

‘I don’t understand.’

Elaina smirked at him now.

‘You don’t know how to talk to girls do you.’

The statement wasn’t phrased as a question.

‘Am I really that easy to read?’ Cam groaned, turning away again.

He took his hand off the wall slowly, straightening up.

‘She fancies you’ Elaina

‘Fancies?’

‘Because you’re so handsome.’

‘What?’

Elaina sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of her nose. ‘Gods you’re hard work. Did you not *have* women where you came from?’

‘I never really met other women growing up’ Cam blurted without thinking. ‘Only ser....’ He broke off suddenly.

Elaina twitched then, ears perked. ‘Were you about to say *servants*?’

Cam took a step back, hugging himself and hunching his shoulders.

‘Where on earth did you live to have servants around you? Were they *your* servants?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Fine’ Elaina said shortly. ‘I don’t care anyway.’

‘Wait’ Cam called after her as she made to leave. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Home’ Elaina said as it her were obvious. ‘You should be going home too. It’s getting late.’

Cam glanced around him fearfully then, feeling suddenly exposed without Elaina around him. She wasn’t like the other women he had encountered, she didn’t seem to care that much for him, and that was the reason he suddenly feared being without her.

‘Please don’t go’ he blurted out to her.

‘Don’t be silly’ she laughed at him without a pause in her step. ‘I have things to do. Just go home already.’

Cam swallowed nervously as he watched her leave him. He glanced about him, and then moved quickly, heading back home.

‘So how did it go?’ Wallace asked him when Cam returned home.

‘Fine’ Cam answered shortly, speaking to his feet.

The family were just preparing dinner, and Cam shuffled along the wall and out of the way as Beatrice moved past him carrying a large plate piled high with food. It was a small kitchen, and with all of them here it became very crowded.

‘Sit down’ Henry said to him indicating a chair at the table.

Cam did so quickly. He liked this family; they were good to him and treated him kindly. But even so, Cam still didn't feel comfortable here, even in the many weeks he had lived at this home.

It just wasn't the same as when he had lived with Durril.

Cam felt a twinge of sadness. How he missed him.

'Here you are' Beatrice smiled gently as she placed Cam's food before him.

As usual, it was too much and he was unlikely to eat it all. Cam always had leftovers, but that still didn't stop Beatrice from piling his plate up high.

'Did Elaina show you how to do it properly?' Wallace enquired.

'Yes.'

'You met Elaina?' Joe asked. 'She's a good girl, always so hard working.'

'What happened to your head by the way?' Beatrice asked him, taking a seat next to her husband.

'Oh' Cam said, unconsciously touching the bandage around his head. 'One of the horses kicked me.'

Henry beside him instantly began to cackle.

'Quiet boy' Joe snapped. 'It's no laughing matter. He could have been seriously hurt.'

'Well it would serve him right for being so useless' Henry smirked, lifting his fork and beginning to eat. 'Honestly. One would think you've never worked a day in your life.'

Cam glanced towards him nervously, keeping silent.

'You still haven't told us where you came from' Beatrice said to him quietly.

'Nor shall I' Cam mumbled back. 'It is a life I wish to forget.'

'But don't you have family? Anyone who cares for you?'

'The only ones I care about....are safer if I stay away.'

The next day, Cam helped the brothers catch some chickens.

'Ok now watch carefully' Henry said to him holding the chicken's neck in his hand. 'You hold it like this' he demonstrated, and Cam instantly began to feel sick as he realised what was coming, 'and then go like this' Henry said, snapping the chicken's neck and killing it instantly, making Cam flinch. 'There' Henry finished, handing the chicken to him. 'Dinner.'

Cam held the chicken tightly by a leg, panicking slightly as the animal began to flap.

'I-it's still alive!'

'No it's dead.' Wallace told him shortly. 'They're just muscle reflexes.'

'What do I do?!'

'Just hold it' Henry told him angrily. 'It'll stop moving in a minute.'

'This is horrible...' Cam whimpered, holding the chicken as it continued to flap.

'What do you mean?' Wallace frowned in annoyance. 'How do you think it gets on your plate? He shook his head, mumbling under his breath. 'Spoilt rich kid.'

Cam held the unfortunate bird; its flapping became less frequent until it stopped altogether.

'Here' Henry told him, handing him another chicken, this one alive. 'Your turn.'

'No' Cam said in a panic. 'I'm not doing it! I can't.'

'You have to learn sometime' Henry pressed.

'I can't kill another animal!'

'It's just a chicken' Henry snapped.

Cam stared at him frozen. He began to tremble, then fell to his knees and began to cry into his hands, letting the chicken run free and escape.

A short while later, he was sitting by himself at the edge of the field just outside the small village, resting in the freshly ploughed earth, facing out towards the setting sun with his chin resting on the fence, arms folded over the wood as he sat.

It was so peaceful and tranquil, in the village, yet he felt so miserable here. The chores he was given every day were difficult for him, and he struggled everyday to relate to people. Everyone had been curious about him in the beginning, now they were even more so, but now they thought him strange. Too many people had seen how he behaved, and they talked amongst themselves.

They thought there was something wrong with him. Cam had heard their whispers as they gossiped behind his back. Most had come to believe he was born simple into a rich family, who had cast him out because of the way he was....weird. He couldn't relate to people in a way that was deemed normal, and everyone knew it.

But the one person who didn't seem to think this, was Elaina. She was considered peculiar by a lot of people too, but she coped well with this, and still had friends.

She didn't care what people said about her.

Cam groaned to himself as he shifted in the dirt where he sat.

He wondered then, that if anything were to happen to him, would the family he lived with worry, would they even care?

Cam let out a sigh, blinking slowly.

At least he thought to himself, I am safe here.

The sun burned in the sky before him, and ever glowing sphere, never fading, never dying.

I wonder what Luke and Valery are doing right now. I hope they are safe.

He raised his head then as a thought struck him.

I wonder if there are any temples nearby. Perhaps the family would let me borrow a horse and I could ride to one. I would very much like to pray for my brother and Valery; perhaps the gods would hear my prayers clearer if I were in a temple.

He let out another sigh then, closing his eyes and allowing his body to relax.

Tomorrow, he thought. I will ask them tomorrow.

'I've never see you so excited about anything' Beatrice said when Cam told the family of his plans at breakfast the next morning. 'I think it would be good for you. It's good to see you really happy. You're normally so glum.'

'So I can go?' Cam asked urgently. 'Please?'

'I don't see why not' Beatrice said turning to Joe with a grin. He smiled back at her.

'Henry' Joe said, picking a son at random. 'I want you to go with him. Cam doesn't know where our nearest temple is and he would only get lost.'

Henry stopped chasing his egg around his plate. 'I actually had plans...'

'They can wait' Joe interrupted. 'You can see how important this is to him.'

'But the sheep need to be shorn today.'

'Wallace will do it. Won't you Wallace?' Joe said forcibly volunteering him.

‘Well I am *now* aren’t I?’

‘I’ll make it up to both of you’ Cam said to the brothers. ‘I promise.’

They both stared at him unconvinced.

Later that morning, Cam and Wallace readied the horses. It was a few hours ride to the temple, but an easy enough journey Cam was told. He had been given food to keep them going along the way; he carried the bag at his side, the strap slung over his shoulder.

‘Right’ Wallace said, pulling back the reins as he regarded Cam. ‘Ready?’

Cam mounted the horse he had been given, turning to Wallace before answering. ‘Ready’ he answered.

Wallace tapped his heels into the horse. The animal jerked its head back sharply, before trotting out of the stables with a flick of the tail. Cam rode after him, urging his animal onwards. He was far more comfortable riding the horses than he was actually caring for them. The horse he had been given was a particularly docile one, one of the better behaved in the village. Cam was grateful he had been given this particular horse which he knew fairly well by now, each had different personalities, the one Wallace had been given was a little livelier. As Cam caught up with him, he heard Wallace cursing under his breath.

‘Dam animal’ he snarled through gritted teeth as his horse began to dance on the spot, tossing its head around. Wallace cast a glance beside him towards Cam. ‘It’s still early in the morning’ he said, ‘he’s still full of energy’ he indicated the horse. ‘Fancy a run?’

‘Yeah’ Cam said smiling. ‘After you.’

Wallace released his grasp on the reins, no longer pulling them back but kicking his heels hard into the beast’s flank.

The horse picked up pace swiftly, Cam sending his own horse after it.

They tore across the open land, running at full speed. Cam’s eyes watered as the wind stung them, and he held on for dear life, a little afraid at travelling such a speed, but also excited, as he felt the adrenaline coursing through his body.

He resisted the urge to call out in joy as his clothes and hair whipped in the strong wind as they raced onwards, slowing gradually as the horses began to tire.

It was many minutes later when they returned to a gentle pace, coming to a slow walk.

Cam let out a breath as Wallace turned to him with a sigh.

‘How did that feel?’

‘That was fun’ Cam huffed.

Wallace grinned back, turning away again.

‘You picked a good day to make this journey’ Wallace told him, tilting his head back to the sun. ‘Clear sky...a beautiful blue.’

‘Listen’ Cam whispered then, ‘do you hear that?’

Both of them fell silent as they heard the call of a bird, seeing it flying high above their heads through the air.

‘A skylark’ Wallace said. ‘You get many of them around here.’

‘How do you know what it is?’

‘Because I’ve seen them before’ Wallace replied.

The bird above them flew ever higher, and was soon lost from sight.

‘But it’s so far away’ Cam said to him. ‘How can you tell?’

‘Only Skylarks sound like that’ Wallace said.

‘It’s amazing how you knew.’

‘I know all sorts of bird calls. I can tell what type of bird is singing just by listening to its song.’

‘Really?’ Cam said impressed. ‘How did you learn that?’

‘But watching’ Wallace answered quietly, ‘and listening.’

‘I couldn’t do that.’

‘Do you not have birds where *you* come from?’

Cam felt a twinge of nervousness then. ‘No....I mean....yes. But I’m afraid I spent most of my life indoors.’

‘That’s a shame.’

‘I guess it is.’

‘You really missed out’ Wallace told him. ‘The world is not inside behind closed doors, it’s out there’ he said, casting his arm out wide and indicating the plains around them.

‘Do you think I could still learn about the world?’ Cam asked him. ‘I mean...it isn’t too late?’

‘It’s never too late to live’ Wallace replied with a smile, ‘it’s never too late to learn.’

‘I would love to be able to do what you can do’ Cam sighed, ‘knowing a bird just by hearing its call.’

‘You can’ Wallace said. ‘You just need to look and listen, and remember.’

They reached the temple only a few hours later, having rested only once and eaten a little of the food they had brought with them.

Now their horses stood side by side, as they stared closely at the temple ahead of them.

‘It’s nice’ Cam said as he observed it.

‘It’s only small’ Wallace shrugged, ‘not like the grand ones the city has.’

‘No’ Cam said again. ‘It’s nice.’

‘Come on’ Wallace mumbled dismounting his horse.

Cam followed suit, walking up the stone path towards the building he followed after Wallace, leading their horses with them. They went off the path before they reached the main doors, heading towards a small courtyard to one side where they tied their horses to posts, leaving them to wait for their masters return.

Then together, they ascended the wide and gentle steps towards the temple.

The doors before them were open, they were tall and made of thick and dark wood, upon the surface of each of the doors were carved depictions. Cam recognised them, pausing for the briefest moment as they made their way. The depiction was of the holy celebration that happened once every eighty years, and rejoiced the coming of the first rays of sunlight in the sky after an eighty year long winter. Upon the wood were carved men and women singing and dancing as fireworks lit up the painted sky above them. The door was intricately detail and beautiful.

He passed by these doors, having fallen a few steps behind Wallace, he moved to catch up.

Cam tilted his head back up as they moved within the temple. It was hexagonal in shape, its roof built like a great point, sheets of clear glass in rows hung above them in the ceiling, allowing the light from the world above them to shine down. It took Cam’s breath away. The temple was small, and indeed modest in design to the ones in the capital. But there was

something about this one that stirred emotions within him, of awe and reverence. Cam's heart leapt in his chest as he stared up at the sky through the windows above them. He drew a slow gasp as he watched the clouds part and the sun emerge; he squinted, blinking several times as the light shone in his eyes.

'Hey' Wallace said staring at him. He had stopped and was watching Cam now with a hand on his hip as he waited expectantly. 'Are we going?'

'Yes' Cam whispered moving forwards. 'Sorry.'

He jogged up to him to catch up, walking by his side once more.

Cam's attention swiftly began to wander as he spotted several figures around them, they were dressed in modest clothes coloured white, and wearing a blue sash around their waists with their hair covered. They drifted quietly by. These were the holy figures that cared for the temple, cared for travellers, and helped to heal the sick. They also listened to prayers and confessions. They were the eyes and the ears and the hearts of the gods, or so it was told.

Cam and Wallace reached the centre of the temple where there was a bench in the shape of a hexagon; positioned perfectly in the middle to match the temple it sat in. Wallace turned, descending onto the bench and leaning back.

'Well?' he said to Cam. 'What exactly was it you wanted here?'

Cam's attention flickered away from Wallace then, towards the holy figures and back again.

'I...can I have a look around?'

'Sure' Wallace shrugged carelessly, sighing heavily and closing his eyes. 'Take your time.'

Cam nodded gratefully, moving away from Wallace and back towards the edge of the temple. At the edges of this holy building were located smaller rooms which ran all the way around. These rooms had specific purposes. Healing rooms where the sick were cared for, dormitories where the holy figures that lived here permanently slept, offices where the holy heads worked, and other rooms that Cam didn't know. Despite this being only a very small temple, these rooms were used often, and there were several holy figures that lived here.

Cam approached one of the statues that encircled the empty space in the middle of the temple. Here were the statues of the seven gods that it was believed had created this world. There were four female figures, and three male figures. Each was different from the other, and each bore at least one distinguishing feature. One had knives for fingers and a great disk on his back, a lizard-like tail curled around his feet. Another wore a crown of blue feathers, body clad in gold. Another had six wings and a pair of horns. And another had a scaly tail like a fish, her body enveloped by two eels.

Cam slowly walked around the edge of the temple, gazing at each of the faces of the seven gods in turn, until he walked full circle around the temple, and came back to the first god he had approached.

The statue he stood before now was that of the god Ezla, depicted as a man growing out of stone, with a bare chest and sharp claws.

Cam thought to himself as he stared at the stone, the figure forever frozen in that pose as it grasped the lower half of his body which was only rock, tearing at himself with an expression of rage.

The story of Ezla was a sad one. He had fallen madly in love with the goddess Micro, imprisoning her beneath the earth for eighty long years. The warmth from the sun she created had been taken away, and the land was thrown into a savage winter, it was a time where gales

blew none stop, a time where it was always dark and nothing grew, people and animals starved.

Ezla had loved Micro his entire life, but even after eighty years, she did not love him back. Eventually she convinced him to let her go, and Ezla released her, dying it was said many years later of a broken heart. But a god could not be dead forever, and he was brought back to life, only to die over and over again, as time and again, she rejected him.

Many thought Ezla to be evil for stealing her away, and causing so many to die in the following winter. But many worshiped him for his loyalty and pure heart. He never stopped loving her. No matter what.

What an incredible being Cam thought as he stared at the god's face. But here he did not see anger in his face, but grief.

'Are you alright?'

Cam turned to the figure that had spoken, a holy figure. A woman.

'Yes' Cam mumbled, stepping back from the statue and turning to face her.

'Are you a believer?' she asked him with a smile, glancing briefly towards the statue.

Cam raised his head.

'May I speak with you?' he asked her politely. 'I have some troubles.'

A short while later and Cam was sitting in one the small rooms at the edge of the temple, alone with the holy woman.

'He used to beat me, hurt me...I was always scared of him, and...I struggle to trust people...even now...I don't really trust anyone anymore.....only my brother...and one other...'

The woman had been listening silently as Cam opened up to her. She had been hearing every word, and caught Cam off-guard with the next thing she said.

'Did he rape you?'

Cam tensed suddenly, staring at her wide-eyed. She stared neutrally back at him.

Cam suddenly bowed his head then, shuddering as tears prickled in his eyes.

'I'm sorry' Cam whispered, gritting his teeth.

'It's alright' the woman spoke kindly, 'I understand.'

'It's just been so hard' Cam whispered, not trusting his voice not to waver, 'for so long I've felt so alone...'

'You are not alone' the holy woman said to him, reaching out and grasping his hand firmly.

Cam tensed slightly, but as he looked up to her face, he saw that her eyes were gentle.

He relaxed a little.

'I have seen and spoken with many troubled souls who have passed through this temple' the holy woman said to him. 'They ask us for help. We console them. You are not the first to tell me a story like this.'

'I'm...I'm not?'

The woman shook her head, then smiled.

She withdrew her hand, letting go of him.

'You are not alone' she said. 'In fact, there was a boy I spoke to just the other day, whom this was happening to.'

'And?' Cam asked her tentatively. 'W-what happened?'

The woman smiled.

‘Look’ she said turning away and gazing out of the little glass window in the door. ‘Do you see that person out there?’

Cam followed her gaze, seeing a young man about seventeen in age moving across the temple, lighting several candles before one of the statues, before kneeling and bowing his head in prayer.

‘He lives with us now’ the woman said turning back to face Cam. ‘He was abused by his father, his mother also who beat him. He’s been with us only for a short time, but he is very happy here.’ The woman fell silent for a moment. ‘Would you like to speak to him?’

Cam hesitated, unsure of what to say.

‘I’m...afraid of strangers’ he told the woman fearfully, ‘especially men....I’m...afraid....I don’t trust them.’

‘I understand’ the woman replied. ‘But he has been through the same thing as you have. You can trust him. He may be able to help you.’

Cam stared at the holy woman for several seconds, mulling this idea over in his head.

He still felt afraid, but in the end he agreed, deciding the trust the holy figure’s word.

Moments later, the young man sat beside the woman in the small room before Cam.

‘I am very happy’ the young man was saying. ‘I thought that I could not escape, that I would never escape, but one day I was brave. I left my home, and travelled alone to this temple. I had nothing, no food or shelter, only the clothes on my back. I was starving... I travelled across the plains alone, and slept out in the wilderness, in whatever shelter I could find. I never stopped travelling, rain or shine, night or day. I was desperate to reach this temple, and when I finally did....’ The young man paused, a slow smile spread across his face. ‘It was the most liberating experience in my life. For the first time ever, I felt I have achieved true happiness...and I did it on my own. My days of suffering are behind me now, and I have never looked back. The people here are good to me. They fed me, and gave me a place to stay. I live here now. This is my life. This is what I want. They helped me here, and now I will help others.’

Cam tilted his head as he listened. The young man continued.

‘I had been brainwashed to think that I could not survive without the parents who abused me. But it was thanks to my faith in the gods, that I took the risk in leaving.’

Cam looked down.

‘Something still bothers you?’ the young man said. The woman beside him was utterly silent now.

‘I’ve escaped my difficult past’ Cam mumbled. ‘I’ve gotten away from the abuse.....but I have not found true happiness.’

‘How did you escape?’ the young man asked him.

‘Well’ Cam began uncertainly. ‘I don’t exactly remember how I escaped. I....my memory is blank. I only remember running away. I was found by a gypsy who cared for me for some time. Now I live with a family in a small village. But I am not as happy as when I lived with the gypsy.’

‘Why did he leave you?’ the young man asked.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Then why aren’t you happy with the family you live with now?’

Cam chewed his lip in thought. 'I have to earn my keep' he said, 'but I'm no good at farming...and they all think me to be a fool.'

'Then why don't you change jobs?' the young man suggested.

'What?'

'Have you considered doing another job?'

'No' Cam thought aloud, brow furrowed. 'I.....it never occurred to me.'

'Perhaps you should look for another job you might enjoy more, something you are good at. Perhaps you could even earn enough to own your own place.'

'My own place?'

'There must be homes in the village' the young man offered with a smile. 'Maybe one of them could be yours. Just think about it. This is a new start for you. You could do anything with it. You could have your own home, a new life. You could pursue your own desires, marry, and have children, and make a family of your own.'

Cam stared hard at the floor as this new realisation slowly dawned on him.

'The world really is yours' the young man encouraged, 'your life...your own. What are you going to do with it?'

Cam approached Wallace who had closed his eyes and was beginning to fall asleep. Wallace glanced up as he heard Cam's footsteps.

'Finally' he huffed. 'Are you ready to go back now?'

'Nearly' Cam breathed. 'I just want to do one more thing.'

Cam knelt before the statue of the goddess Zeana, a depiction of a woman with great curved horns. She had pointed ears, and eyes that were covered by her own long hair tied around her head.

He bowed his head, and began to pray, interrupted minutes later by Wallace.

'What do you pray for?'

'For my brother's safety' Cam replied, 'amongst other things...'

'If you care so much for you brother then why did you leave him?'

'I had no choice.'

'Well...' Wallace sighed, crossing his arms, 'he must really mean a lot to you.'

Interlude start

'I've always liked this room' Lucas was saying gazing about him. 'It's always been pleasant for me.'

Reuben turned to him, carrying a bag of pretzels, some crisps and packets of nuts in both arms. He was so laden that he had to carry one of the packets in his mouth. He spat it out, into the pile he carried. It slid off the top and fell to the floor.

‘Why?’ Reuben asked his brother. ‘Why do you like this room so much? It’s always so deserted.’

They were in their home world. Lacklustre Paradise. There were many rooms and vast halls in the building in which the eight resided. The building was made of white stone and everything inside was very bright. The windows were tall, the light from outside shone through the glass so brightly, that from inside the rooms nothing could be seen of the outside. The windows were just a sheet of gold, the light cast inside bouncing off the white stone surfaces and illuminating every corner. Everything was so clean and pure and pristine, that if anyone from outside were ever to visit, they would perhaps think that they were inside the house of god. But this was no heaven, and it was rare for anyone besides the eight to be here. This world was a strange place indeed. In this part of their world, it was midday. All the time. ‘I like this room’ Lucas said answering his brother’s question, ‘*because* it’s deserted. No one ever comes here. They would rather eat in the other worlds, where food is more interesting.’

The brothers were in the part of their home one might have called the kitchen. There was no electricity here, or in any part of the building for that matter. This room was small, and was as bare and simplistic as the other rooms. Within the cupboards it was mostly empty, the only food being the food brought in from other worlds. For nothing could be grown in Lacklustre Paradise.

‘You must like this world a lot then’ Reuben said to his brother. ‘It’s almost always deserted.’ ‘Yeah’ Lucas said bending down to pick up the packet Reuben had dropped. ‘I guess I do.’ He offered the packet back to Reuben, who took it in his mouth again.

Lucas turned, heading out of the ‘kitchen’ and to the next room where there was a table at which they could sit.

This room, this hall, was colossal, with only a single long white stone table in the middle and a ceiling that was impossibly high. Everything within seemed to glow white, and the glass in the tall windows appeared only as sheets of gold, through which nothing could be seen of the outside.

Lucas took a seat in the white chair beside his brother, who sat at the head of the table, dumping all he carried in his arms upon the table. Lucas watched Reuben disinterestedly as he sat himself down, pouring over the food before him before choosing a packet, putting his feet up on the table and leaning back in his chair.

‘Aaaahhh...’ he sighed, before opening the packet and eating noisily.

‘I’m surprised you’re not fat with the amount that you eat’ Lucas mumbled to him.

‘I’m bored’ Reuben stated flatly, staring up at the ceiling above them as he munched loudly.

‘Want to visit a world together?’

‘Yeah’ Reuben sighed. ‘Maybe...’

Reuben continued to eat. He paused, yawned, and continued to eat again.

Lucas let out a slow breath, turning away and looking across the hall. Everything here was so bare, so bland, pretty at the same time, yet boring.

‘You’d think we’d have a better system for cataloguing and organising the worlds’ Reuben spoke suddenly.

Lucas turned back to him.

‘Just think about it’ Reuben continued. ‘We spend our entire lives visiting and exploring other worlds, and yet we don’t record any of what we see. If I were to die right now, then

everything I have learnt about the other worlds would be lost. The same would happen if you were to die, or if any other of the eight were to die. It's strange how we don't even have any proper names for the other worlds.'

'It's just not how we work' Lucas said.

'I miss Love' Reuben mumbled to himself suddenly. 'I've returned to my normal self since...' he looked at his own hand, where his skin had returned to its fleshy pink. His eyes had also lost their glow, the pupils were round like a human instead of vertical slits like a cats. The process had been slow, but he had physically begun to change back to his old self, ever since he had stopped visiting the world which had begun to change him. 'Say...' Reuben began, suddenly changing the subject. 'I haven't seen Isami for a while. Where is she?'

Lucas felt a slight twinge in his stomach at the sound of her name.

'I...' he began looking away. 'I don't know.'

'Hm' Reuben sighed carelessly. 'I wonder where she has gotten to; I haven't seen her for over a year.'

'Yeah' Lucas mumbled. 'It's strange.'

'And Lucretia' Reuben went on. 'I haven't seen her since she first came here.'

'She's having adventures' Lucas told him simply. 'She seems to be enjoying this new life greatly. She only returns here to rest briefly, before going off again.'

'Hmm' Reuben sighed again. He stretched back in his chair, looking all around him. 'I wonder what the others are doing' he said absentmindedly to himself.

Lucas straightened up. 'Come on' he said. 'Let's visit a world.'

Reuben leapt up quickly, suddenly full of life.

'Get the cloaks and masks' Lucas said to him moving away. 'I'll go to the control room.'

Reuben nodded once before making his way away. Lucas marched across the silent hall, his footsteps echoing off the smooth white stone floor. He moved out of the hall, and into the narrower corridors. But before he could reach the control room, a figure stepped out in front of him.

Lucas slowed to a stop, staring ahead at the figure.

'Isami...'

She raised her head, wearing a sombre expression.

'Lucas' she said, her voice strained. 'I have...I...'

Lucas looked down as she revealed what she held in her arms. He had not seen at first, for her folded arms had been tucked beneath her cloak. Now his heart skipped a beat at what he saw. He drew a slow and deep breath, and his eyes grew wide.

'What is this?' he spoke in a whisper, not trusting his own voice suddenly.

'Your son' Isami spoke huskily. 'It's...why I've been gone all this time.'

Lucas heard movement behind him. He turned sharply around, seeing Reuben standing behind him. His eyes were wide with shock.

'Is it true?' he asked stepping forwards.

Lucas was listless as he turned slowly away from his brother, looking back at the baby.

'It is' he said.

'But how?'

'Isami and I...' Lucas began, but he never finished his sentence.

The three of them looked down, staring at the child who lay still in Isami's arms, deep in sleep and happy.

'I cannot care for him here' Isami spoke in a distant voice. 'I must...take him somewhere safe. Somewhere...he will be loved.'

There were tears in her eyes as she said this, and Lucas was surprised by how much this pained her, and how much it pained him to see her like this.

'Alright' Lucas spoke quietly. 'We will take him somewhere safe.'

'Do you want me to stay behind?' Reuben asked.

'No' Isami spoke sharply. 'No' she repeated again quieter now. 'I want...I want us all to go...together, I...don't want to be alone.'

The three of them stepped through the portal, one after the other with Isami following after the brothers. They came to a world that was peaceful, a world that was beautiful.

'He will be happy here I think' Isami sighed as they approached the holy temple. 'The people here are good and kind. The city here is wealthy, and there has been no war for many lifetimes.'

The three of them entered the temple, leaving the baby boy at the head of the great hall, bundled up in folded cloth. Isami lay him on the dark marbled floor, at the feet of a life-size bronze statue of a bull, trampling three snakes that writhed at its feet.

'He will be happy here' Isami spoke sadly, taking a step away slowly. 'He will grow to be healthy, and live a good long life...I am sure of it.'

'We should go' Reuben whispered, glancing around them. 'I don't know how long this place will be deserted.'

'Goodbye my little one' Isami whispered as she turned away. 'I will be watching over you.'

The three of them left the area quickly as a group of holy figures entered the hall from the other end.

The three masked and cloaked figures stood at a distance, hidden behind the columns they watched, as the holy figures approached the statue, and the child was carried away.

Lucas felt something strange inside him as he saw this, an emotion he could not name.

'What did you call him?' he asked Isami. 'I saw a name written on his wrist.'

She turned to him, before answering.

'His name' she said, 'is Rolo Luxis Flyte'

Interlude end

'I want to be a blacksmith.'

Joe looked up at Cam, giving him a confused expression. Cam had only just walked through the door to the home in which he lived when he blurted this out. Even Wallace beside him looked surprised.

‘What?’ he fumbled. ‘You didn’t say anything about that on our way back from the temple.’ They had only just returned, when Cam had mentioned this, on the entire journey back Cam had been completely silent, lost in thought.

‘I didn’t think about it until just this very moment’ Cam told him.

‘Well perhaps you should think on it a bit more’ Wallace suggested, but Cam wasn’t listening.

‘I want to be a blacksmith’ Cam said again excitedly.

‘Why?’ Joe asked as he sat down at the table beside his was his wife Beatrice and son Henry.

‘I’ve been talking to the holy figures at the temple’ Cam was saying, ‘and they’ve given me some advice.’

‘You shouldn’t listen to them’ Henry told Cam shortly. ‘You know they only want money.’

‘You’re wrong’ Cam snapped at him angrily. ‘They helped me.’ He bowed his head, placing his hand over his heart. ‘I’m no good at being a farmer’ he said. ‘It’s time I chose a new profession.’

‘But we still need your help here’ Beatrice said to him.

‘I know’ Cam said meeting her gaze. ‘I’m extremely grateful for everything you’ve all done for me. I’m willing to help you whenever you need me, if you still want me.....but...I feel I need to look after myself now. I want my own home, my own job. I want to earn money like a normal person.’

‘You are a normal person’ Beatrice told him, leaning forwards on her elbows, beaming at him.

Cam smiled back at her gratefully.

I feel like I am now.

‘I’m grateful for all of you; you’ve done so much for me. But can I ask from you all, just one last thing?’

‘What is it?’ Joe asked him.

‘Can you help me?’ Cam asked them, ‘help me achieve this goal. Then I can move into a place of my own, and no longer be a burden to any of you.’

They all stared at him in surprise.

Beside him Wallace considered him.

‘I have a friend in the trade’ Wallace spoke up. ‘He is a blacksmith. He may be able to help you.’

‘Really?’ Cam gasped, turning back to Wallace eagerly.

‘Yeah’ he mumbled. ‘We could go see him now if you like.’

A short time later, Cam stood beside Wallace nervously, blinking several times as the smoke from the furnaces stung his eyes.

‘Have you done anything like this before?’ the blacksmith that stood before him asked.

‘No’ Cam answered reluctantly. ‘But I’m willing to learn. I want to try. Will you please at least give me a chance?’

Wallace and the blacksmith exchanged a glance.

The blacksmith smirked then, giving a shrug.

‘May as well see what you can do.’

He watched as Cam practiced making his first horseshoe, a process that took several minutes.

‘Not the best’ the blacksmith noted. ‘But it’s not bad. It might even get better some day.’

‘So you’ll let me help?’ Cam asked him desperately.

‘I will allow you to stay’ the blacksmith replied. ‘You can work here and learn. If by a month’s time you’re any good, then I will start paying you.’

‘Really?’ Cam’s eye lit up then, and he glanced towards Wallace excitedly.

‘Don’t get too confident’ the blacksmith told him sternly, ‘there’s a lot for you to understand before you can be considered any good. It took me my entire life to get to where I am now, and I started early. But, with a bit of patience on my part and a lot of work on your part, you might become passable.’

‘When can I start?’ Cam breathed.

The blacksmith shrugged. ‘Now.’

A month passed, and Cam had just finished his first paid day at the blacksmith, it wasn’t much, but he was grateful for every penny.

‘You’re doing really well’ Wallace told him sounding surprised. ‘Really. I mean it. No offense but I thought you would do a terrible job at that too.’

‘Thanks’ Cam smirked. He was familiar with Wallace’s ways by now, and he knew that he was being kind.

‘We should celebrate’ Henry said, leaning against the wall of the kitchen with his arms folded. ‘I think it would feel right to do so.’

Cam and Wallace who were sitting at the table in the small kitchen both turned to him.

‘That sounds like a wonderful idea’ Wallace said. ‘I’ll go find mother. You know how she loves this sort of thing.’

‘Hold on a minute’ Cam began uncertainly as Wallace left the room. ‘What exactly are we celebrating?’

Henry smirked. ‘Does it matter?’

Later that day, Cam left the house with Henry to help out in some work; he was approached by a boy of about twelve. The boy was one of the many people in the village Cam had become familiar with in his time living here, and Cam might even have considered him a friend.

‘Wallace says you’re throwing a celebration’ the boy said eagerly to Cam. ‘Is that true?’

But before Cam could answer, Henry spoke out for him.

‘We sure are’ he gleamed down at the boy. ‘Run and tell your sister, tell your mother and father, and tell your neighbour...and tell them all to tell someone else.... We’re going to make this as big as we possibly can.’

‘I will’ the boy nodded obediently. ‘But...what are we celebrating?’

‘Life’ Henry smiled at the boy. ‘We are celebrating life.’

‘You don’t have to do this’ Cam said timidly to Henry as the boy scuttled away. ‘I don’t want to be a bother to anyone.’

‘It’s no bother’ Henry waved back at him. ‘The truth is...I’m doing this for purely selfish reasons.’

‘What reasons?’

Henry gleamed at him. ‘It’s been far too long since we’ve had a celebration, and I want to get completely smashed.’

The celebration began at midday the very next day, and as the hours ticked on; more and more people began to join in the crowd as barrels full of ale and wine were brought out along with more food than Cam had ever seen at one time. And it was here that Cam discovered with much surprise, that both brothers, Henry and Wallace were musically gifted. They both played their strings heartily, running a bow across their violins. A young woman, a lover of Wallace joined them playing the flute, and a young boy sitting at their feet played the drums. Shortly after they first started playing, as if they were attracted by the music, the gypsies arrived in small groups.

Cam watched with envy as they called out to the villagers, selling from the brightly painted carriages, an assortment of different items that came from all corners of the map. From items they could find in the village neighbouring theirs, to rare items found only in other kingdoms and across the sea.

Cam watched from a short distance as a young girl picked up a strange item one of the gypsy men offered her. It looked like a metal ball, and when it was rolled, it began to sing.

He watched as one of the gypsies, a handsome young man, pulled out a flute, and began to play merrily away his tune.

He felt a sudden pang of loneliness, and loss, as he thought again of Durril. The gypsy who played the flute now, reminded him so much of Durril, and the life he had lost.

It doesn’t matter anymore Cam thought angrily to himself. *That life is over. I am creating a new one for myself here.*

It was only a short time after that, that the gypsies and village folk began to dance, as the lights around them were lit with the coming darkness.

Cam watched from a distance as the people danced before him, the peasants in their dark coloured practical clothes, and the gypsies, in their bright yellows, oranges and reds.

A child ran past him then and towards her mother. Cam heard a strange ringing noise, and turned to see the child showing her mother the singing ball one of the gypsies had been selling.

The mother smiled widely at her daughter, scooping her up in her arms and kissing her on the cheek.

Cam glowered, expression growing dark with resentment.

‘I’ve seen one of those before’ a voice said from beside him.

Cam glanced around, starting slightly, seeing a familiar female figure standing beside him. It was the young woman who had helped and had shown him how to milk the cows.

‘Elaine’ Cam mumbled, relaxing slightly, ‘it’s you...’

‘Is it?’ Elaine replied sounding surprised. ‘Let me check.’ She patted herself down.

‘Yup...it’s me’ she finished with a smile.

Cam said nothing.

Elaina looked past him and to the mother and child, seeing the singing ball the child carried as they moved away.

'Those things' she spoke in a distant voice, 'those strange metal balls, they come from a place very far away, in a country that is hot and mostly desert.'

'I've never been there' Cam mumbled. 'I've never seen such a thing either.'

'They have camels there' Elaina said. 'I've never seen one though.'

'Me neither.'

'Would you like to?' Elaina asked.

Cam turned towards her. 'Why would I? It's just an animal.'

'I find animals fascinating. Even around here you see so many different kinds. And anyway,' she shot him a sly look, 'I thought you wanted to learn all about the wildlife around here. You know, know the bird just by hearing its call.'

Cam's stomach twitched and he narrowed his eyes with sudden mistrust.

'Who told you that?'

'Wallace' she beamed. 'We're pretty close. We've known each other since we were children.'

'Oh' Cam turned away moodily. 'I guess that's not so surprising, in this small village...everyone talks.'

'We don't see each other so much nowadays, since we grew up...Wallace and I...but...we still meet from time to time.'

'Why were you talking about me anyway?' Cam asked his feet.

Elaina shrugged. 'We just talk.'

They fell into silence as they watched the people dance, listening to the beautiful music.

'I hope no girls are giving you a hard time now' Elaina spoke out of the blue, after several minutes.

'No.' Cam said shortly. 'I'm fine.'

'You're so strange' she said to him.

'Am I?'

'Are you happy here?' she asked him suddenly.

'That's a strange question' Cam scoffed. 'Why would you ask me that?'

'Are you?'

Cam looked back at the gypsies.

'Do you ever wish' he asked her, 'that you knew what your future would hold?'

'Why? Would you try to change it?'

'I don't know. I think it's my past I would rather change.'

Cam rose to his feet swiftly then, walking away from her before she could say another word.

He didn't want to talk to her, didn't want to think about his past, and so just walked away from it all.

'Hey Cam!' Henry called out to him.

Cam paused as he was making his way forwards, heading to nowhere in particular. Henry was part of a large group now of figures celebrating, laughing and singing and drinking. He stood now with a woman hanging off him, another standing his other side.

Henry beacons Cam over to him, and Cam reluctantly trudged closer.

‘How are you doing?’ Henry slurred. ‘Are you having fun?’

The gypsy woman hanging off him grinned slyly at Cam. She was sober. Cam could see that she was admiring his features, he was handsome after all.

‘Yes’ Cam answered Henry’s question. ‘I’m having fun.’

‘Good!’ he wobbled slightly where he stood, and his cheeks were flushed. ‘I’d like to introduce you to someone’ he said aloud, turning to the woman beside him. ‘This is Catrin.’

Cam furrowed his brow then, blinking quickly as he suddenly recognised her. The dark haired slender figure was the one who had kissed him previously in the shed. He had pushed her away, and assumed he would never see her again. Apparently she had not lost interest after all.

‘Hello Cam’ she said to him. ‘Remember me?’

‘Yes’ Cam replied sombrely. ‘I do.’

Henry convinced them that they should be alone, and somehow, Cam found himself sharing a drink with her.

The hours passed.

‘You’ve had quite a lot’ Catrin noted, seeing the empty bottles around him.

Cam had been so nervous in her presence; he had made himself drunk very quickly, and was now sitting at the bench, swaying slightly from side to side.

The dancing and singing gypsies he saw over her shoulder, to Cam were nothing but moving shades of colour, like the flames in a hearth, reds and oranges and yellows all moving as one in a mass of confusion.

‘Are you feeling alright?’ Catrin asked him.

‘I...’ Cam mumbled. He groaned heavily, resting his head in his hands.

I feel so sick...

‘You’re so handsome’ Catrin said to him. She had had a drink herself, and had regained her old swagger. But she was nowhere near as intoxicated as he was.

Cam felt her hands upon his shoulders. He glanced up at her, seeing her reaching out to him from across the table where they sat.

Catrin stood up, leaning forwards over the table, she kissed him.

Cam’s mind was a haze, he was only partially aware of what was happening around him, and it took him several seconds to realise what she was doing to him.

She leant back after a time, smiling down at him.

‘Why don’t we go somewhere more private?’ she suggested alluringly. ‘We could have a lot more fun if we were alone.’

His eyes became dull, as he blinked slowly up at her

‘I have a place of my own’ she told him, whispering into his ear. ‘Why don’t we go there?’

Cam woke up early the next morning feeling sick and confused. He turned over, shielding his eyes from the light that was blaring through the window.

He groaned, hand going to his head, he grasped the edge of the pillow and rolled over, hiding from the world beneath it, and keeping the sun at bay, all the while, experiencing the sensation of his brain being pounded by a tenderizer.

He lay there for a long time, before he realised that something was off. The pillow smelt different. It smelt of perfume.

Cam moved the pillow away, staring at it long and hard for several seconds, his mind working incredibly slowly. Every move he made was gradual, and he felt like he was wading through a bog.

The pillow was cream and bore pink roses.

Not my pillow Cam thought.

It was then that Cam realised he didn't recognise the ceiling above him.

I'm in a different room...

He turned his head to the side, seeing Catrin sleeping next to him.

Cam stared at her, blinking slowly. Then his eyes slowly widened. He looked forward again towards the ceiling, his heart beating faster as he drew short sharp breaths, coming quickly to himself now.

We didn't....

He ran his hand down his own body, sighing with relief when he felt the shirt he still wore and his trousers still on.

Oh thank the gods.

He sat up gingerly, watching Catrin lying beside him, noticing with even greater relief that she too was still dressed.

She shifted when she heard him move, opening her eyes and smiling up at him.

'Mmmmm....morning....' she pushed herself up, resting on her elbow. 'Are you alright?' she asked him. 'You look terrified.'

Cam's hand went to his face then, and he turned away from her.

'I wasn't myself last night' he mumbled. He let his hand drop. 'I should go.'

Catrin grabbed his hand suddenly as he made to leave.

'Wait' she said to him. 'Why are you leaving?'

Cam had felt sudden fear at being grabbed like that, but as his mind began to process the situation, he realised slowly that there was nothing to fear.

From what he could read of the situation, and her reaction, the expression on her face, he didn't think that she wanted to hurt him.

'I don't know' Cam grumbled back, trying to ignore the pain in his head. 'This just doesn't feel right.'

'Please don't leave' she begged of him. 'I want you to stay.'

'Why?'

'Because I care about you.'

Cam stared down at her hand as she held him by the wrist, her grasp was firm.

His attention flickered back up at her then.

'Why don't you accept me?' she asked him. 'I would be good to you.'

'I'm sorry' Cam uttered. 'I've been hurt in the past.'

'I would never hurt you.'

'I don't trust people.'

'Let me in' she whispered desperately to him, letting go of his wrist and weaving her fingers between his. 'Let me help you. You cannot spend your whole life living in fear.'

He stared back at her blankly.

‘Why did you come here?’ she asked him. ‘Why did you leave your old life behind? To get a new start? Isn’t that what you want?’

Cam blinked slowly, thinking only about the pain in his head.

‘*Let me in*’ Catrin repeated. ‘Let me help you. I *promise* I will listen. I promise I will be good to you.’

Shortly after, they left her home together and went to the edge of one of the fields, from which they sat and watched the sunrise.

‘This is my life from now on it seems’ Cam spoke to the wind. ‘I don’t think I will ever see my family again.’

‘Why is that?’

‘I...’ Cam began, bowing his head. ‘Certain things happened’ he finished without explanation.

‘But won’t they miss you?’ Catrin asked. ‘What about your parents?’

‘My father died many years ago when I was still young’ Cam said in a deadpan voice. ‘My mother is indifferent to me...she always has been to me and my brother....’ he broke off suddenly. ‘My brother is the only one I will miss, him and...’ he trailed off.

‘Do you think your brother misses you?’

‘I think so....I mean....I don’t know. Things have been....*strange* between us for a while.’

‘But why?’ Catrin asked him. ‘Siblings should be close to one another, they should look out for one another...I have many...’

‘Yeah’ Cam said to his knees. ‘We do...I mean we did. It’s just....’ He gritted his teeth, boding beginning to tremble slightly. ‘Do you ever think that in order to protect someone, you have to keep them at a distance?’

‘No’ Catrin answered quietly. ‘I’ve never known anything like that.’

‘Well...’ Cam said pulling at the grass beside him. ‘It’s sort of complicated.’

‘Do you think you will ever go back home?’

‘No’ Cam mumbled unhappily. ‘I don’t think I will ever see him again...’ his eyes grew distant. ‘He is far away...and this here is my life now.’

‘But things might change’ Catrin offered. ‘Things might get better. There might be a day where you could see your brother again. Wouldn’t you like that?’

‘I would’ Cam admitted. ‘But its best I think...if I forget about all that. That’s in the past. It’s best for both of us if we never see each other again.’

Catrin watched him with a curious expression; in her mind she couldn’t imagine what would cause someone to say such things.

‘I will never go back there’ Cam whispered. ‘Never, not for as long as I live...’

Cam raised his head to the horizons. He smiled then.

‘I find it a bit exciting, scary...uncertain...but exciting.’

‘What?’ Catrin asked him.

‘This’ Cam indicated all that was around him. ‘Living freely, the prospect of finding my own place in life away from...’ he turned from her. ‘I’m happy’ he said facing the other way. ‘I *want* to stay here.’

‘Well that’s good’ Catrin chuckled. ‘I want you to stay here. I would be sad if you left.’

Cam faced her then, surprised by what she said.

‘I don’t understand...’

Catrin reached towards him, resting her hand on his. She leant forward, and kissed him gently on the lips.

Cam’s heart tightened in his chest, and he stared back at her in shock and uncertainty, but he didn’t push her away.

‘I want you to stay’ Catrin told him again, leaning back. ‘I really do.’

She rose to her feet suddenly, walking slowly away from him, heading back home.

‘I’ll see you another time’ she told him pausing. ‘It was nice...being here with you.’ She smiled warmly at him, turning and walking away again.

Cam watched her go. He was left alone once more.

He faced the sun before him, hugging his knees to him and feeling strange inside.

Why did she do that? Does she want to be friends? Does she feel close to me? What does she want?

Cam touched his lips where she had kissed him.

Why do people kiss?

He clenched his fist.

It doesn’t matter. Things will work themselves out in the end, I’m sure they will.

He tilted his head back to the beautiful clear sky above.

I have freedom, people who are nice to me, who don’t hurt me, people who even seem to care for me.

He rested his chin on his knees.

It would be nice I think to stay here, I don’t ever want to go back home to the palace again, and I won’t.

Cam closed his eyes, feeling faint emotions of happiness stirring inside him.

That chapter of my life is over.

Chapter Seventeen

Several more weeks passed, and Cam’s life in the village was slowly beginning to change.

One day, when he was working with the blacksmith, Cam held his hands open; his palms piled high with seeds.

Sparrows instantly flew to him, clinging to his fingers with their tiny claws and hopping up and down his arms, pecking energetically at the seeds and squabbling amongst one another as they fed.

Cam grinned widely down at them, feeling their little beaks pecking the skin on his palm as they picked at the seeds. But there were not only sparrows that ate out of his hands, but finches too, tits and thrushes and blackbirds.

It had taken him hours and hours of his free time everyday to make the birds this tame to him. While the birds that lived here were always familiar with the people, Cam had not known them to willingly eat out of anyone's hand before. He believed he was the first, and this made him happy.

Cam was overcome with joy the first time a bird landed on his hand, he had watched utterly still and wide eyed, as the bird cautiously took some seeds, before flying away again. But it returned less than a minute later, to eat again. The other birds seeing the actions of this bolder one soon followed suit, until the behaviour spread. Now, the birds would not only fly to his hand, but sit on his arms too, and his shoulders, and his head.

Cam had come to be known now as 'the bird man', a title he greatly approved of, and was proud of. He felt that it showed his patience and kindness towards smaller life.

'Cam!' the blacksmith called out to him from nearby. 'Come on. Your break is over. Time to get back to work.'

Cam lowered his arms slowly, watching with a smile on his face as the little sparrows flew away.

He turned back to the blacksmith. 'I'm coming.'

Cam spent his days working alongside the blacksmith, learning the trade. He would work every single day, and it was hard, but he became used to the toil. In the evenings, and sometimes in the afternoon when he finished work early, Cam would borrow a horse and ride away. He felt safe enough to do so alone nowadays, travelling far and wide across the open plains and entering the forests, crossing the rivers, riding in the waves along the coast, exploring the caves that were hidden there.

One day he came to a river, and from a distance he saw a family of otters playing. He came here time and again, whenever he could. He didn't see them every time he came here, as they were secretive, but he saw them often enough to begin to be able to distinguish them from one another. There were two parents, and their young cubs, still learning to swim. One of the days he came to visit this river near the coast, he saw a flash of blue shoot past him. It took him a while to see it again, this time when it was still. It was a kingfisher, a beautiful little bird of striking colour.

Cam was happier now than he had ever been. Never in his life had he been freer. And never in his life had he felt more 'normal'. But he would think about his brother still, and of Valery, and in the evenings, and before he went to bed, he would pray. He had no statue before which to pray, so he didn't know if any of the eight gods would hear his prayers. But he thought to himself, that if he prayed often enough, he would surely be heard.

Please, I pray to each of the seven gods and goddesses that live in the world above us, please look out for my brother...and for Valery. Please watch over them and keep them safe. Let them live a happy life. A safe life. Let them not live in fear.

Cam opened his eyes and raised his head; he had been kneeling on the bed in the home he still shared with Joe, Beatrice, Henry and Wallace. He looked through the tiny window now, to the darkening sky.

Luke. Please still be alive. I don't know what is happening to you. I don't know if you are still in danger, and I pray to the gods that Brioke... he squeezed his eyes tight shut as his heart skipped a beat. Please just stay safe. I hope that one day we may meet again. With all my heart I wish this...

But there was more than these things which were beginning to change. Catrin had not yet lost interest in him, and began to 'appear' at certain times around him, when he had finished work, on the way home, when he was just about to leave the village to go out riding, when he was helping with the farm work and at other times too.

The two were gradually being drawn closer together.

They spent time together, would walk together, talk together. They would spend many days together, and many people around them began to acknowledge the two being in a relationship. But Cam never allowed himself to enter her bed again, and in time, she began to drift away from him.

'I'm sorry' Henry said to him one day, when Catrin had been seen with another man. 'These things happen.'

'It's ok' Cam mumbled to him as they stood together outside, leaning against the porch as they watched the chickens scratching at the dirt looking for food. 'It doesn't matter.'

'There are other women out there' Henry continued. 'You'll be alright.'

It was shortly after that, that Cam had earned enough money to build his own home.

'I want it right here' Cam was saying, standing on a plot of land on the edge of the village. You get the sunset' he said pointing away, 'and I like the view of the fields from here.'

'Fine' Henry smirked, standing behind him with his hands on his hips. 'Then here is where it will be.'

It was only small, but it took several weeks to build the house, the entire village helped to do it.

When it was finished, Cam felt proud.

'I've never had a place of my own before' he said, standing in what was now the kitchen, turning slowly on the spot and taking in every detail of the room around him.

'How do you feel about it?' Beatrice asked him excitedly. She and her entire family were here now. 'Are you happy with it?'

'It's wonderful' Cam smiled a genuine smile. 'It's small, but its mine...my very own.'

That evening, the family and Cam had a meal together. A pig was killed especially for the occasion, and as the sun began to set, the five of them sat at the table in the small kitchen to eat. There was roast vegetables and gravy, and as usual when Beatrice was around, there was way too much food for all of them to finish.

'It's ok' Beatrice said to him with a smile. 'You can snack on the leftovers tomorrow.'

'I guess it would save me cooking again' Cam agreed.

That night, he spent his first night in his new home, sleeping in a new bed, with clean sheets, staring up at the new ceiling, alone.

He heard the rain patter on the window pane beside him, the single candle in the small room flickered.

Cam let out a heavy sigh, closing his eyes.

He was happy, but he felt a twinge in his heart, a sense of negative emotion.

Luke...

The true realisation that he may never see his brother again slowly began to dawn on him.

Cam turned over on his bed, holding his pillow tightly. He began to cry silent tears.

The next morning, Cam woke early.

He wandered about his house for several minutes, simply looking at everything.

And then he noticed something.

‘Something’s missing’ he said to himself.

He turned and left the house quickly

‘I want you to make something for me’ he said to the blacksmith.

‘What do you need?’

Cam explained hastily, and the blacksmith listened mutely. He agreed to make what Cam requested, and a few days later, Cam was able to collect it.

He placed it in his home upon the small table at the foot of his bed, facing the room. It was a statue of the god Ezla, the one that had imprisoned Micro under the earth for eighty long years. Depicted as a man growing out of stone, with a bare chest and sharp claws, leaning forward and grasping the lower half of his body which was only rock. The figure was forever frozen in that pose, tearing at himself with an expression of rage.

Cam like this god, there was something about this one that was different from the others.

Many thought Ezla to be evil, but many worshiped him for his loyalty and pure heart.

Cam tilted his head at the statue as he considered it. The entire thing was carved out of metal, the inside was hollow. It was only modest in size, not as impressive as the ones at the temple, but good enough for his home.

Cam knelt before it, bowing his head, and taking a deep breath.

A short time later, the village had an unusually good harvest, and everyone was needed to work the fields. At the same time, a small fire had broken out in Cam’s home. The cause was unknown, thankfully it had not caused too much damage, but there was much that needed to be done in order to repair it.

The only person that was free to help him, was Elaina.

‘It’s not so bad’ Elaina said as she surveyed the blackened room around her. ‘We’ll get this fixed up in no time.’

It took only a day or two to fix the place, when it was finished; it looked as if there had never been a fire at all.

‘Thank you for your help’ Cam said to her shyly.

‘It’s a nice place this’ Elaina said as she gazed about. ‘You know what would make it look better?’

‘What?’ Cam asked her.

Elaina eyes roved around the room, studying it closely. ‘It would be nice if there were maybe some flowers’ she said. ‘There’ she said pointing to the table near her. ‘Or there’ she said pointing to the corner, ‘a painting or two on the wall, a bit of colour....’

‘Y-you think so?’ Cam asked her uncertainly.

The two began to spend more and more time together, and a bond began to form.

One morning, Cam was standing on the tiny balcony of his home, leaning forward on the rails holding his hands out for the birds that fed on the seeds he held. He giggled to himself quietly as they tickled him, their little claws scratching at his arms and their little beaks pecking at his palms.

They all left him one by one when the seeds were all gone. Cam brought his hands together, dusting them off. He raised his head, grinning as he saw the pretty little creatures flying through the air here and there. Off in the distance, he saw a swallow, gliding through the air gracefully, and another sitting at the head of a barn, he recognised it by its familiar call.

Cam sighed, feeling the sun’s warm rays upon his skin.

He didn’t remember feeling so proud in his life, so self fulfilling and so worthy. Never before had he owned his own home. Never before had he had a job, been self sustaining, and above all, felt safe.

He knew people in this village, they were kind, and treated him with respect. Without the family that had cared for him for so long, had fed him and given him a room and encouraged him when he needed it, he would not be where he was now.

Cam felt like a normal person now. His life of living in the palace, the fears and the pain he had suffered, seemed nothing but a distant memory, so far away that it felt as if he had experienced it in another lifetime. But despite all of this, Cam still sometimes thought of the ones he left behind. But nowadays, it was less often. They began to fade from his mind, as the days passed, Cam piece by piece, lost a little of the memory he had of them, especially of Luke. The time they had spent together as children, the fun they had, back in the day when life was good, back in the days when their father was alive, before he became sick. But recently, Cam was even forgetting his own father. He was slowly forgetting everything about him, and now, couldn’t even remember what he looked like anymore.

He looked down, feeling his heart skip a beat as he saw Elaina below him on the ground. She raised her hand, waving up at him.

He straightened, waving back at her awkwardly.

She smirked at him, as if he had done something funny, and moved off.

Later that day, Cam helped Joe and his family work on the farm. He collected eggs, milked the cows, carried bales of hay and water for the animals. When all this was done, he invited them to his home and cooked for them.

‘You’ve come such a long way since you first came to us’ Beatrice told him kindly, admiring the place around her. ‘This house looks wonderful!’

‘Elaina helped me tidy it up after the fire’ Cam explained, as he worked preparing meat in the kitchen. ‘She’s been really kind to me.’

‘Perhaps you should marry her’ Beatrice suggested. ‘I think you two would be a good match. I think it would be nice for you to live in this house with her, she’s not seeing anyone right now. Just think about it, you could even have children together and start a family of your own.’

Cam paused what he was doing, staring down hard at the meat he had been cutting.

He said nothing.

The next day, after he had finished work, Cam went to find Elaina. She was in the wheat field, standing in the strong wind with her back to him, holding her hands together behind her. She turned to him as he approached her, as if sensing him here, her hair blowing in the breeze. She looked beautiful standing there, with the sun setting behind her. Cam smiled at her, and approached. Seconds later, they sat side by side on the lip of the hill, Cam bowed his head against the wind, and beside him Elaina raised her hand to hold her hair back as she turned to face him 'It's so strong today' she said absent mindedly. 'I like days like these. The wind feels good, it makes me feel free.' Cam tilted his head, saying nothing. Elaina moved so that she knelt before him now, facing him head on. 'I'm going to kiss you' Elaina said to him. 'I don't want you to be alarmed.' Cam's eyes widened slightly, and he felt his stomach clench, his heart skip a beat. Elaina waited, perhaps expecting him to speak, perhaps waiting for permission. But when Cam didn't speak, didn't react at all, she moved closer towards him, leaning forwards and doing so slowly, allowing him to see every move that she was about to make. She touched his shoulder gently as she kissed him. Cam did not push her away. Instead he lifted his hand to brush her cheek, kissing her tenderly back. He leant back, lying on the grass as Elaina leant over him, her hair falling over her face. She smiled, gazing down at him. She raised her hand, running it through her own hair, holding it back from the wind. 'Are you alright?' she asked him. 'If I'm going too far, just tell me.' 'I will' Cam said to her. 'I'm fine.' Elaina cupped his face in her hands, running her thumb across his bottom lip softly. 'I don't know what happened to you' she said gently to him, 'but I know you've lived through something terrible.' She continued to caress him as she spoke. 'I want to make you happy' she whispered. 'I don't want you to be afraid anymore.' 'I don't want to be afraid' Cam whispered back. Elaina bent down, kissing him again. 'I know' she said. 'We all want to live the best life that we possibly can.'

The next time Cam saw Elaina, she asked him for a favour. 'I want to travel' she said to him. 'I want to go on a holiday together, just the two of us. Wouldn't you like that?' 'I think that would be nice' Cam grinned at her, as the thought dawned on him. 'We should travel to a town' she suggested, 'go somewhere nice.' Cam's expression broke into a wide smile then, and he grasped her hands tightly in his. 'That sounds wonderful' he said excitedly. 'We should go right now.' 'What?' Elaina chuckled uncertainly. 'You mean...now?' 'Yes' Cam urged hurriedly. 'Now.' Elaina giggled then, amused by his sudden urgency.

‘What’s the rush?’ she asked him.

‘Well...’ Cam shuffled, averting his eyes and becoming a little shy, ‘why wait?’

‘Alright’ she said stepping back and folding her hands before her. ‘Where would you like to go?’

‘I don’t really know’ Cam admitted. ‘I don’t really know the area as well as you do. Where would *you* like to go?’

Elaina beamed at him happily. She took him by the arm, walking away with him.

‘I know the most wonderful place’ she sighed dreamily, ‘where they light these tiny lamps which run through the entire town, down every street, outside every home. They twinkle like little stars of every colour. You can see the town from miles away. I have only visited the town once, a long time ago when I was younger.’ Her eyes grew distant. ‘I have wished’ she said, ‘sometimes, that I could fly over that town at night, like a bird, and see it from above.’

Cam let go of her, turning to face her, walking backwards as she continued to walk normally, kicking his feet playfully as he went. ‘It sounds like a wonderful place to be’ told her.

‘We could go *there*.’

Elaina slowed to a stop, Cam followed suit. Elaina was frowning deep in thought.

‘We could rent a carriage to take us. It’s not far.’

Cam lifted his eyes to hers, meeting her gaze.

He reached for her, moving close he kissed her tenderly on the lips, before stepping back.

‘I...just want you to know’ he began, ‘that I am happy with you.’

‘I hope so’ she told him. ‘Because...’ she grinned widely at him, ‘I care about you’ she told him. ‘I really do.’ She smiled again, dipping her head. ‘I’m...’ she mumbled, ‘glad we met.’

Cam blinked at her, feeling a strange emotion rising inside him, one he was unfamiliar with.

‘Let’s go’ he said to her. ‘I want to see this town of yours.’

About an hour or so later, Cam and Elaina had packed a few personal belongings and were sharing a carriage. It trundled along the road heading away from the village, and every closer to the town with the twinkling lights.

Cam shifted nervously in his seat. He watched Elaina out of the corner of his eye, hoping she wouldn’t notice. She was leaning out of the window of the carriage, eyes closed and feeling the breeze on her face.

Cam felt his stomach tighten a little. He watched as she sighed in contentment, watched as the breeze blew her hair back.

He looked away suddenly, clenching his teeth.

‘It’s starting to get dark’ Elaina spoke quietly after a time. ‘The stars are coming out.’ She glanced back at him. ‘Can you see them?’ she asked Cam. ‘Can you see the stars in the sky?’

Cam raised his head then, glancing past her out the window.

‘Yes’ he whispered. ‘I can see them.’

She left her seat then, moving over to sit next to him. Cam tensed suddenly as she leant into him, resting her cheek against his shoulder. She let out a slow breath and closed her eyes, falling still.

Cam stared down at her, feeling a lump in his throat. He relaxed slightly, bowing his head against hers. He closed his eyes too, and was asleep in minutes. Despite the slight tremble of the carriage as they made their way along the road, the two rested peacefully.

They woke together when the carriage came to a stop a long while later, when they reached their destination. Elaina shifted, straightening up and stretching.

‘Are we here?’ she groaned.

‘Yeah’ Cam said sitting up. ‘I think so.’

They got out of the carriage gradually, Cam carrying their bags and resting them on the pavement as he turned to pay the driver, who took the money graciously, before dipping his head and snapping the reins, moving quickly off.

They were just making their way through the town when Cam bumped into a figure; he stumbled back, mumbling his apologies.

He bit his tongue suddenly, staring closely at the person, knowing instantly that something was off.

The man standing before him looked different. His skin didn’t look like skin at all, but more like a sort of plastic, and was utterly smooth, with none of the natural creases that skin normally had around the mouth and eyes. The figure was incredibly handsome, and almost too perfect, even his hair was impossibly neat.

‘I’m sorry’ Cam said again, speaking a little clearer this time.

The figure stared at him intently, before giving him a wide grin.

He didn’t say anything, only gave him a knowing look.

The figure turned suddenly and walked away without even speaking.

Cam stared after him, watching him curiously.

‘That was strange. Who *was* that?’ Elaina asked him. ‘Do you know him?’

‘No’ Cam mumbled. ‘I’ve never seen him before.’

The handsome figure glanced back towards Cam briefly one last time before rounding the corner at the end of the street.

He smirked, replacing the crows mask to his face before opening the portal and stepping through.

‘The inn is this way I think’ Cam said, grasping the handles of the bags he carried tighter. ‘Come on. Let’s go.’

They spent that night watching the New Year fireworks from their balcony, staring up as lights blossomed in the dark world above them, lasting only seconds before fading away.

A beauty so fleeting.

‘I love fireworks’ Elaina whispered, as another shot upwards into the sky before exploding, lighting up her features before dying into darkness. ‘They are so striking aren’t they? So beautiful...and so strange.’

‘They are’ Cam nodded.

They stayed up late that night, talking and drinking. When they did finally go to bed, they went to bed together.

‘Goodnight Elaina’ Cam said, leaning over her.

She giggled tipsily back at him, reaching up to kiss him on the cheek.

‘Goodnight’ she sighed, before lying down on her side facing him and becoming still.

Cam watched her for a moment, before resting back and closing his eyes. He gave himself up to his dreams, where he dreamed of the most wonderful things, of lights and stars and bright

colours shining in the night's sky. But when he woke the next morning, these dreams were lost to memory.

They stayed in the town for several days before returning home. When they reached their little village again, Elaina spoke to Cam.

'Come over to my place tonight' she offered. 'I'll cook for you.'

'That sounds wonderful' he replied, chuckling awkwardly and scratching the back of his head.

'So you'll come?'

Cam nodded once, smiling to himself. 'Sure. I'll come.'

She took a step towards him, reaching out to take him by the arm as she kissed him briefly, gazing into his eyes.

'I had a really good time' she said to him. 'Thank you for sharing that with me.'

'I-it's ok' Cam replied shyly. 'I had a good time too.'

'We should do it again sometime.'

'Yeah.'

Elaina nodded to him. 'Well' she said. 'I had better be going. I'm sure we will see each other again soon.'

'Of course' Cam replied, 'I mean...I hope so.'

Elaina dipped her head at him, before turning and walking away, sparing him one last teasing glance as she went.

Cam went home to unpack, where he was found by Wallace shortly after.

'So did you have a good time?' Wallace asked him, leaning through the open kitchen window from outside.

'Yeah' Cam said straightening and putting down the things he had been unpacking. 'We did.'

'So when are you going to marry her?' Wallace asked, only half-teasingly.

'Shut up' Cam glowered.

Wallace sniggered at him.

'You can tell me all about it later' Wallace said, 'and mother wants to know too. You know how she loves to fawn of you two. Anyway' Wallace continued, 'we need your help milking the cows. You won't be long will you?'

'Of course not' Cam replied hastily. 'I'll be out in a moment.'

In no time at all, Cam was in the field milking one of the cows.

'Work never stops here does it?' he said happily. 'I haven't even had a chance to rest. Get home...get straight back to work...'

'You've got that right' Wallace sighed, chewing on a twig as he leant on the fence behind him. 'When do you go back to the blacksmiths?'

'Later today' Cam replied.

'Work never stops' Wallace repeated happily.

Cam grinned quietly to himself.

'So Elaina's going to cook for you tonight' Wallace continued.

'She is.'

'So how long before you have children running around?'

'Are you still going on about that?'

Wallace smirked as Cam rose to his feet, looking down at the buckets he had filled.

‘I’ll be back in a minute’ Cam mumbled. ‘I’ve just got to empty these.’

‘Sure thing!’ Wallace called out to him as Cam lifted the two buckets, carrying them on a yoke across his shoulders. ‘I’ll be here waiting!’

Wallace watched him go, remaining where he was leaning back against the fence.

Cam carried the milk across the field, heading to the barn nearby. He left the field through the small wooden gate, rounding the corner of the stables.

He had nearly reached the barn when a figure stepped out in front of him.

‘Cameron the farmer’ the soldier spoke coldly. ‘I never thought I’d see the day.’

Cam instantly froze where he was, dropping the milk he carried.

He turned to run away, instead running head long into another figure that had loomed up behind him, another soldier.

Cam stumbled back and fell, staring wide eyed up in shock at the tall armoured figure.

‘Come now Cameron’ the soldier before him said calmly. ‘There’s no need for this. We’re here to take you home.’

‘I d-d-d-d-d...’ Cam screwed his eyes shut, forcing himself to speak properly. ‘I don’t want to go home!’

‘You have no choice’ the soldier behind him said.

‘I won’t!’

The soldier grabbed him by his arm, hauling him to his feet; Cam instantly flinched at the contact, trembling in fear as the soldier growled at him.

‘You don’t. Have a choice’ the soldier spoke dangerously. ‘Do you see these people?’

Cam glanced up fearfully, shoulders hunched. He saw small groups of people beginning to gather around them, though they kept their distance, afraid of the soldiers as he was. Cam could hear their whispers from where he stood.

‘What are soldiers doing here? What do they want with Cam?’

‘I’ve been given orders to eliminate them if you won’t come willingly’ the soldier said in a voice quiet enough so that only Cam could hear him. ‘Do you want to see them all *die*?’

‘N-no please’ Cam whispered, tears rolling down his cheeks. ‘Don’t...’

‘You care about them don’t you?’ the soldier asked him.

‘Yes.’

‘And you don’t want to see them hurt?’

‘No.’

The soldier slowly released his grasp on his arm.

‘You will come willingly back home to the palace, and we will forget about all of this.’

‘Y-yes’ Cam fumbled hastily.

The soldier clicked his fingers, and another brought forth a horse.

‘Get on’ the soldier ordered Cam.

Cam obeyed, lost for anything else to do, he simply followed orders now. He mounted the stallion and waited for further instructions.

Other soldiers began to descend upon him now, surrounding him. The ones not already on horses, left to fetch their own, while the others already mounted stood guard over Cam who sat upon the horse he had been given, sweating and experiencing painful sensations in his chest.

Everyone watched him now, as more people began to gather at a distance. Cam felt very nervous and exposed, the centre of attention for everyone around as the people continued to whisper.

When the other soldiers had retrieved their horses, one of the soldiers grumbled to him.

‘Let’s go.’

The soldiers leading tapped their heels into their horses and began to slowly head out of the village, the others begin Cam waited for him to move, guarding him closely.

Cam reluctantly followed after the leading soldiers, surrounded by the men. He spotted Beatrice in the crowd then, one of the many faces staring up at him in shock.

He called out to her.

‘I’m sorry Beatrice! I’m sorry!’

‘Where are you going?’ she hollered back. ‘What’s going on?!’

‘Tell Elaina...!’ he gritted his teeth, swallowing the lump in his throat before forcing himself to continue. ‘Tell Elaina I love her!’

He turned his head sharply away so that he could not see her anymore, so that she could not see his tears.

Just let it all be over he pleaded. I just want it to end...

The band of soldiers surrounding Cam left the village, and together, they headed back to the palace.

The dreaded palace, where Cam had endured so much pain, for so many years...

Interlude start

‘You know what the cruel irony is?’ Castello said to Tiara.

The two masked figure looked at each other.

‘No’ Tiara answered back. ‘Please tell me. What is the cruel irony?’

‘Well’ Castello began, turning back to the monitor before them. ‘Cam gave Durril a ring as a small payment and thanks for everything Durril had done for him. Durril gave this ring to the family in the village, to pay them for caring for Cam. They sold it for money obviously, and it was because of this ring...that Cam was found.’

‘How so?’

‘Well...’ Castello said. ‘Only one very wealthy could own such a fabulous ring. Therefore it was easy to trace.’

‘Oh.’

‘The ring was given by Cam to Durril as thanks, and then given by Durril to a family, in an honest gesture, and to pay for Cam’s care. But...it was because of this ring...that he was found...and returned to the palace.’

‘Life can be a real bitch sometimes’ Tiara sighed, turning away. ‘We didn’t even interfere this time and it still happened.’ She paused. ‘For the longest time we forgot about him, and he made his own happiness. And then by his own hand, unbeknown to him, it was taken away. By his own hand.’ She shook her head.

‘It would have happened anyway’ Castello shrugged, gliding across the room and closer to her. ‘One day. He is a king after all...they would never stop searching for him.’

‘I wonder what they will do with him’ Tiara said.

‘Let’s find out.’

They both turned back to the monitor and watched in silence.

Interlude end

It took many days to reach the capital, and in that time Cam was guarded closely the entire way. There was not a single moment that at least one of the soldiers was not watching him, not even throughout the nights while he slept. Not once during the entire journey, and as they entered the capital by one of the many main roads, Cam began to experience the old fears coming back to him. He rode in the centre of the group, the soldiers all around him. Some rode their horses ahead of him, some behind, and some either side.

Cam swallowed nervously, feeling uneasy being surrounded by these men, but there was nothing he could do. He couldn’t even voice his worries. He was sure they wouldn’t listen, and if he spoke out he would only look weak.

As they walked their horses slowly through the streets, small crowds began to gather. Many talked, whispered behind their hands and cast glances to one another as word began to spread of the king’s return.

‘Your sudden disappearance has caused quite a stir’ one of the guards beside him mentioned. ‘It was big news, we’ve have been searching for you since you’ve been gone.’ He smirked then. ‘I do wonder how you got away from us, and how you hid for so long.’

Cam clenched his jaw as he stared back at the guard. He didn’t entirely think the man’s intentions were honest.

‘The people’ the guard continued looking away, ‘they’ve been worried for you. They are glad you’ve returned.’

But they didn’t look glad Cam realised as he gazed about. They appeared only curious, neither happy nor sad that he was back. Perhaps they had felt the same when he had left.

What am I to these people? Cam thought miserably. *What do they think of me? Do they care?* And then Cam’s heart jolted in his chest as another thought struck him.

Brioke...

A cloud descended over him, and his vision fogged momentarily before returning to normal.

What’s going to happen? Cam thought beginning to feel even more afraid. *Oh god...what is he going to do to me....?! He will kill me for this...*

Cam squeezed his eyes tight shut, willing himself not to cry as tears came to him. He could already feel himself beginning to drown in his own fear.

I have to be strong.....I have to be strong.....I have to be strong.....

He opened his eyes again, staring in dread at the back of the horses head as he rode onwards.

...don't cry...

They approached the palace, and the main gates were opened for them to enter.

Cam felt strange here, so strange after being away for so long, after adjusting to more than one new life, after truly beginning to believe that he would never return to this place.

Everything looked the same...yet different. He couldn't explain it.

They entered the palace grounds, marching slowly up the path towards the palace itself.

The building was just as Cam remembered it, tall and celestial-looking; he remembered the many stairs it held within.

They stopped before the main doors. The guards dismounted their horses, Cam followed suit.

He straightened himself as stablemen approached to take the horses away. One of the guards that had not accompanied them, but had stayed at the palace waiting for their arrival, approached Cam. He looked him up and down, smirking at his clothes. Cam was dressed like a common peasant, in plain and practical brown and dark clothes. Not like the fine ones he used to wear when people knew him as a king.

'I guess a lot has changed.'

Cam didn't understand what the man meant by this.

'Follow me' the guard said briskly.

Several of the guards formed a shield around Cam as he was led forwards, some stayed behind.

Cam's eyes lifted to the ceiling as he entered the palace. He found himself realising that he had never before appreciated the true beauty of the place. He had lived here all his life, and had known no different. Thinking back to the tiny cupboard-sized room he had lived in back in the village, the palace seemed out of this world in comparison. Built tall enough to tower over all the other buildings in the city, it was the tallest building in the kingdom, with hundreds of rooms, and a ridiculous number of stairs. So many stairs.

But Cam was not taken up any of these stairs where the important rooms were, but down.

'Where are we going?' he asked tentatively as he realised they were not ascending.

'Just keep silent' one of the guards said, his tone was not a kind one. 'You will see soon enough.'

'But there's nothing down these stairs' Cam thought aloud, 'there's only the prisons down here.'

He froze suddenly, eyes wide with horror as he realised what he had just said.

'What's going on?!'

The guards either side grabbed him then, dragging him down the stairs.

Cam screamed in panic, trying in vain to fight against them. 'NO! Please let me go! LUKE! Where is Luke?! Where is he?! Does he know I'm here?!'

They ignored his cries as they dragged him down. Cam tried to resist, to fight them, to pull away. But they were far stronger than him.

His screams echoed off the walls of the dark tunnel and back at him as he was hauled away down the stairs.

They approached level ground, marching down a straight corridor, before the guard walking ahead of him opened one of the doors and Cam was taken through and into another room. 'LUKE!' Cam howled as they forced him down into the chair in the centre of the room, the guards tightening the straps around his arms and legs. '*LUKE WHERE ARE YOU?!!*' Tears of fear and panic ran down his cheek as he whispered now in shock and confusion. '....why is this happening...?' Once he was tightly restrained in the chair so that he could not move at all, the soldiers that had subdued him backed away, turning they left the room with the others. The door was slammed shut. Cam heard the bolt slide across from the other side. He heard the muffled echo of the soldier's footsteps receding down the corridor. And then he heard nothing.

Cam sat in the complete darkness. He couldn't see anything around him at all. Nothing. It was pitch black and cold. 'Oh gods...' he wheezed, wide eyes darting all around him as he listened to his own echoing voice within the room. 'It's like hell itself in here...'

He sat there alone for hours, fearing for himself, but most of all fearing for his brother. *Luke...if they would do this to me...what would they do to you?* He shivered violently, partly through fear and shock, partly from the cold. And then he prayed, prayed to all of the gods...for what good it would do. *Please let Luke be safe...he's the only family I have left.....he's the only one in this world who really cares for me...and Valery...oh what have they done with her...?* He gasped then as fresh tears brimmed in his eyes. *Why isn't he here? Why is this happening to me? Has something bad happened to Luke? Why isn't he here to get me out? Why have I been brought here in the first place.....oh gods please no.....please don't let anything have happened to him and Valery...* Cam hung his head, crying openly now.

'Please don't be dead....please...oh gods...'
He started then as he heard the bolt slide across his door, so caught up in his fear and grief; he had not heard the footsteps approaching from the other side. The door swung open, and two figures entered carrying torches. Cam watched them silently, wide-eyed and frozen as they placed the torches in brackets on the wall. 'Hey!' a third figure called out appearing suddenly in the open doorway behind them. 'You're not allowed to be here' the guard said angrily. 'I am a member of the council' the first man that had entered snapped. 'It's my business to be everywhere. Now leave, before I have *you* arrested.'

Cam stared at the figure that had spoken, he suddenly recognised him as Desmond, left hand of the king and indeed a member of the council.

What is going on?

The guard bowed to him only reluctantly, casting a look back at the frightened Cam before departing; closing the door with a snap he left swiftly.

‘Now we can’t leave too much damage’ Desmond spoke up, addressing the other figure in the room that was with him.

Desmond was a well dressed and handsome figure; who looked out of place in the filthy dark dungeons they were in now.

‘Don’t worry’ the second man said. ‘I know what I’m doing.’

The second man was certainly not a member of the council. He looked more like a mercenary, someone who did someone else’s dirty work for a living, a burly and scarred man who had experienced much violence in his time. Violence inflicted upon him, and by him onto others.

This was not a man you wanted to meet.

The scarred man left the room for a moment.

Cam sat in tense silence, eyes wide and darting all around the room, his breath in short sharp gasps.

‘W-w-what are you doing here?’ he stammered to the well dressed man who waited before him. ‘What’s going on?’

‘You should know’ Desmond replied coldly. ‘This is all your fault after all.’

‘W-what?’

Cam’s head whipped around as he heard the scarred man enter the room again.

He approached Cam with metal forceps held in his hand, heated red hot.

Cam screamed in panic, trying to fight free of the straps that held him down, but to no avail.

‘NO! GET AWAY FROM ME!’

Desmond moved quickly behind him. Cam’s head was jerked back as a gag was forced tightly over his mouth.

‘Keep him quiet’ the scarred man hissed. ‘I haven’t even started yet.’

Cam wanted to speak, to ask them questions, to ask them why they were doing this. But he could not, not now with the gag held over his mouth to silence him. Tears ran down his cheeks and his whole body began to tremble violently, watching in horror utterly helpless, as the scarred man moved closer to him with the forceps, and completely powerless to stop him.

Cam clawed at the arm rests he was strapped to, nails digging into the wood as he screamed in agony, his voice muffled by the gag. The scarred man before him individually grasping each nail in turn and slowly prying it from the nail bed before tearing it off altogether.

They physical pain was beyond anything Cam had ever endured. It was far worse than anything Brioke had ever done to him physically.

‘He is an expert in his field’ Desmond spoke down to Cam calmly as he held him there. ‘His line of work allows him to learn all sorts of ways of inflicting pain, especially those that prevent the victim’s death.’

The scarred man paused for a moment, giving him respite. Cam who had been squeezing his eyes tight shut, opened them again slowly, blinking through his tears to stare up at the man that held him, the man that stood behind him, his expression pleading.

But Cam saw nothing in Desmond's face, no emotion of any kind. He realised suddenly with a new wave of terror...how very alone he was at that moment. Whatever was happening, there was no one to protect him, no one to stop this, not even his brother.

Cam began to struggle, fighting violently against his bonds again as the torturer continued, his efforts against his binds in vain as the scarred man ripped from him another nail. Desmond held the gag over his mouth forcefully, muffling Cam's screams.

'That's the last one on that foot' the scarred man said. 'I've run out of nails. Let's move onto the next foot.'

Cam felt anger suddenly streak through him as he let out a snarl, glaring and gritting his teeth at the man kneeling before him as he was consumed by a raw and primal rage. He held his breath, bowing his head and concentrating.

The scarred man stopped suddenly, drawing back for a moment.

'What was that?'

'I felt it too' Desmond said behind Cam.

'That was strange' the scarred man said rising to his feet. 'It felt like the air was heavy all of a sudden...buzzing...I felt vibrations humming in my ears...'

'*You're* doing this' Desmond said accusingly to Cam, releasing his grasp and walking around the chair to stand before him. 'Aren't you?'

Cam, all fear and helplessness suddenly gone from him, tried to lunge forwards, clawing the arms of the chair, not in pain this time, but in fury. He snarled like a demon behind his gag, throwing his head this way and that, trying to free himself from it, until he succeeded. Finally free to speak, he roared in pure rage, hate and loathing filling his heart and soul.

'I'M GOING TO *FUCKING KILL YOU!*'

'You're not in the position to kill anyone my friend' Desmond answered coolly. 'Now what happened the day you ran away? How did you do what you did?'

Cam didn't answer, acting as if he hadn't heard.

'DIE!' he screamed. '*ALL OF YOU DIE!*'

Desmond strode towards him, slapping him hard, then again and again.

Cam jerked his head back towards him when he stopped, cheeks red and stinging, though the anger had still not left him.

'You wouldn't want me to let loose my friend here would you?' Desmond asked him.

'I could make you sing if I wanted' the scarred man told him, still holding the forceps in a hand, the metal glowing red hot. 'I could make you sing many a song.'

'Then...*do* it' Cam hissed, a manic expression on his face.

Desmond and the scarred man exchanged a glance with each other at that.

The scarred man looking back at Cam, then shrugged.

'Fine' he said simply.

He stepped towards Cam, though Cam did not flinch. The torturer approached, holding the hot iron, moving it closer to Cam's face, intending to burn him. But suddenly there was a hiss, and the iron no longer glowed red, but was dull again.

'What the fuck...!' the scarred man stepped back, touching the iron though tentatively at first.

'It's ice cold!'

'You're doing this' Desmond spat. 'Sorcery!'

Cam's upper lip twitched in a snarl as he glared hatefully at both of them. The well dressed man and the torturer both stepped back at the sight of him.

Cam's hair began to lighten, the black fading and transforming to pure white. His clothes began to glow and lighten in colour; his skin began to glow also, the whole room cast in bright and shining light.

'Witchcraft' the torturer uttered. 'I've never seen the like...'

The light began to fade quickly, lasting only a few brief seconds.

Cam's hair returned to black, his skin and clothes darkened to their original state along with the room. Having used too much energy, Cam slumped forwards in his chair, head hung and becoming utterly still.

The men stared in shock at him for several seconds, before Desmond dared approach him, doing so tentatively. He grabbed Cam by the hair and lifted his head up.

'He's lost consciousness.'

'This complicates things' the torturer said. 'What do we do now?'

'We have to tell the others' Desmond said, slowly letting go of Cam and letting his head fall again. 'This is....certainly....very interesting.'

When Cam woke next he was in the same prison cell as before, but completely alone and once again in the pitch dark.

He had no memory of what had happened, and he wondered why he experienced the pain he did.

To him, it felt as if he were missing several toe-nails.

Cam couldn't move, still bound to the chair he waited, for whatever was to happen next.

Chapter Eighteen

'There can be no doubt about it' Desmond was saying. 'It was *he* who did this.'

'I'm still not happy that you went and did this in secret without our knowing' Eden said, leaning forwards on the table with his arms folded. 'It all seems so hard to believe. What you suggest is just preposterous.'

Desmond glanced at the rest of the council sitting around the table, raising his head and speaking clearly so that he may be heard.

'There is no mistake' he declared. 'Our king is a sorcerer.'

'Listen to yourself' Lamont scoffed. 'These sound like the ramblings of a mad man.'

‘It’s the truth’ Desmond spoke firmly, glancing to the scarred man who stood behind him, the torturer. ‘My man can confirm it.’

The other council members fell silent as all their attention fell upon this man. The torturer stood in the shadows, leaning against the wall with his arms folded. He raised his head, glaring back at the faces that stared at him before answering.

‘It is true’ he spoke. ‘Our king is a sorcerer. That makes him dangerous.’

‘This is ridiculous!’ Eden cried. ‘Magic does not *exist*! Have you all lost your minds? It’s nothing but a fairy tale.’

‘What you say borders on treason’ Desmond responded turning to him. ‘What you say, speaks against our religion, the very gods themselves. Why have we spent so many years burning heathens and heretics? Most of them were witches and sorcerers and evil people who would undo the new life we have been creating for the ones we see fit to live, the ones who are good and benefit our society.’

‘Not all would agree with that’ Denzil muttered under his breath.

Desmond turned to address him, but was interrupted before he could speak.

‘Has anyone ever actually *seen* magic?’ Valeri asked.

‘It is a dangerous thing’ Desmond spoke to Valeri. ‘Who knows that he is capable of?’

‘Never the less’ Rhona uttered tentatively, ‘he is still our king. We cannot treat our own king this way.’

‘Look at the damage he did.’

‘Yes but-’

‘My good friend Brioke is missing’ Desmond growling under his breath, balling his fists and gritting his teeth. ‘It is most likely that he is dead. Cam has something to do with it, of that I am certain.’

‘Brioke went missing *after* Cam ran away’ Denzil reminded. ‘He couldn’t have had anything to do with it.’

‘Look at what he did!’ Desmond snapped.

‘We do not know what happened that day’ Rhona spoke calmly. ‘It could be that Brioke went away on his own.’

One of the other council members called Castello turned from Rhona silently, looking to Desmond to hear his reply.

‘No’ Desmond shook his head. ‘Something happened to him. It was shortly after that day...’ he broke off then, baring his teeth angrily.

‘You said before that Cam claims to have no memory of what happened’ Agnus said to Desmond.

‘Well’ Desmond replied cruelly, ‘let’s *make* him remember.’

In the dark of his prison cell, Cam was trying fruitlessly to fight against the binds that held him to the chair. But it was no use, he knew this, and yet he struggled against them anyway, for there was nothing else for him to do.

Why? He thought to himself in shock, eyes wide and unblinking in the dark. *Why is this happening to me? What have I done to deserve this?*

He stopped struggling then, hearing through the door approaching footsteps.

He glanced around fearfully, hearing the bolt slide across the door. Cam squinted as the light from the corridor flooded in, blinking several times to clear his vision. He saw there a scene that filled him only with dread. From where he sat he could see five guards.

He began to tremble involuntarily.

One of the guards stepped into the room while the others stayed behind him. Cam stared wide eyed back at the guard who watched him cautiously.

‘I am going to release you’ the guard spoke evenly. ‘No funny business. Understand?’

Cam nodded quickly, biting his tongue.

The guard knelt before him, doing so very slowly. He never took his eyes off Cam as he very slowly, one by one, unclasped the binds that held Cam to that chair.

‘Rise slowly’ the guard said backing away.

As Cam stared back at the man, he realised something with shock and disbelief.

They're afraid of me...but why...?

Cam obeyed the command given to him, doing so deliberately so that every move he made could be seen.

‘Good’ the guard spoke slowly. ‘Now.’ He indicated the door where the other guards stood, jerking his chin towards it. ‘Walk.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘Don’t ask’ the man glowered back. ‘Just walk.’

Cam did as he was told, moving tentatively towards the door where the other guards waited for him, all of them watching him with suspicious eyes.

Outside in the corridor beyond his door, he saw there were more guards than what he had seen at first. There were ten in number, and they were positioned in the narrow corridor either side of his cell door.

Cam saw with mounting trepidation that they were all heavily armoured, and armed. His eyes grew wider still as his sight travelled down to the men’s hands, where he saw the weapons they carried, swords and crossbows.

Cam swallowed the lump in his throat.

‘You know the way out of the prisons’ the guard that had released him from his chair said to him. ‘Go.’

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘If you ask me that again I’ll make you wish you hadn’t.’

Cam bit his tongue, turning away slowly and walking down the corridor towards the entrance of the prison. He had never been allowed here as a child. His father had always told him scary stories about what happened down here, and the sort of people that were kept in these cells. Cam had always stayed away, but now, he found the truth was far scarier than the stories he had heard.

They tortured me he thought. How could they do that? I'm supposed to be their king?

Cam felt sick to his stomach as he continued to walk.

If they're doing this to me, what of Luke and Valery? He squeezed his eyes tight shut, fighting back his tears. *Oh gods please let them be ok...*

Beyond the prisons when Cam reached the top of the stairs, he found the council waiting for him, the left and right hands of the king, men who were supposed to serve him. There were

six members on the right hand, and five on the left. It was all that was left of the council that was once comprised of forty men, now there was just eleven. It was terrifying how they had dwindled in size. Most did not know the fate of the other missing members, however they were all presumed dead. Everyone left behind was here, everyone except...

Brioke... Cam thought. Where is he?

'Follow me.'

Cam raised his head, recognising the council member that had spoken as the one called Desmond.

Cam suddenly began to feel more afraid.

The council members led the way as Cam was guided through the palace, surrounded at all times by the guards who never took their eyes off him. Cam could see how tense they all were.

He was led down the familiar halls and up several flights of stairs for several minutes, until they stopped.

Cam recognised this room as the one he had confronted Brioke in, what now felt to him like a lifetime ago, when he was someone else.

Cam stepped forwards slowly into the room, staring in disbelief at what was before him. Standing on one side, the council members and guards watched him in silence.

In the floor before him, was a great hole, and as Cam looked over the edge, he could see into the room below, and the one below that, and below that one too. In fact, he realised that the hole went all the way to the ground floor, several stories down.

'It's not just here' Desmond spoke stepping forwards, *'the structure of the entire palace is unstable now because of this damage, and outside, part of the wall surrounding the palace is destroyed, and the entire garden has been set alight. There is only blackened ash.'*

Cam turned in disbelief towards Desmond.

'Look at the destruction' Desmond glowered. *'Look at the carnage.'*

He rounded on Cam, with fury in his eyes.

'You did this.'

'The priest will be here?' Cam uttered.

'Yes' Miranda replied, *gliding past them. 'He has reached these shores, and rides to the capital as we speak.....he will arrive sometime soon. Today in fact.'*

Cam glanced towards Valery, who was watching him closely, eyes wide with expectation.

'Today?' Cam mumbled, *feeling suddenly in shock.*

'And tomorrow' Luke told him, *leaning back against the desk with his arms folded, 'you will be married as quickly as possible. Then perhaps something could be done about this dreadful council.'*

Out in the corridor a short time later, when they were alone, Valery turned to Cam, embracing him tightly.

'What are you...?'

'I'm just so happy' Valery interrupted him, *voice muffled as she spoke into his clothes, holding him tight. 'I want to be married. I want to be yours. I want to be the queen instead of just a princess.'*

'You will' Cam whispered to her, holding her back. 'You will.'

'Cam!' came a sudden and sharp barking call. 'I want to see you in my office.'

Cam's heart plummeted sharply in his chest, and he felt a sudden and sharp fear claw its way into him.

Cam turned, eyes wide as he tried to force himself not to tremble, force himself to stay strong, as he stared back at Brioke who stood behind him.

He swallowed the lump in his throat.

'Is everything alright Cam?' Valery asked him stepping back.

'Yes' he spoke quietly to her, forcing himself to smile. 'Yes everything's fine.'

He looked back at Brioke, who stared at him with a stony expression. Even now he dare not defy him.

'Cam?' Valery asked him, sounding suddenly nervous.

'Can you...' Cam whispered urgently, 'go back to our room?'

'What? But why?' she instantly protested.

'Just...' Cam fumbled. 'Please' he begged. 'Everything is alright I promise. I just need you to go back to your room for a minute. I will join you shortly.'

Valery ground her teeth, glancing once towards Brioke, before looking back at Cam.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes' Cam hastened. 'Just go. Please. I'll be alright I promise.'

Valery stepped away from them both reluctantly. Turning on her heel she marched away, sparing just one last glance back at them, before rounding the corner.

Cam let out the breath he had been holding, glancing hesitantly towards Brioke. Now the two were alone.

'Come with me' Brioke ordered, striding away without pause.

Cam scratched his itchy palms, before following after him. Together they walked through the palace with its many stairs, and back to Brioke's office.

Cam entered the office, and Brioke closed the door behind him.

'I cannot let you go through with this.'

Cam turned back to Brioke, watching him closely. But he was utterly silent. He held his tongue.

'You cannot marry that girl. She is a bad influence. She does not act the way a princess should act.'

Brioke moved across the room and over to his drinks cabinet. Reaching for a bottle he began to pour himself some wine.

'You've been lying to me this whole time' Cam mumbled. 'You've been keeping me in the dark.'

Brioke raised his head slowly, placing the bottle slowly back down.

'I saw you visit the city' Brioke told him. 'I saw you command those guards at the front gates of the palace grounds.' His brow furrowed in thought. 'A few suffer for the greater good' Brioke spoke through a grimace. 'We're making this world a better place.'

'Only for you.'

Brioke fell silent. He turned very slowly to face Cam. Cam had never spoken to Brioke like this before.

'You tried to kill Valery didn't you?'

'She is a liability' Brioke answered. 'She's going to take you away from me.'

'No' Cam said, his voice breaking. 'I will never be yours again. Not ever. After everything you've done to me, only now am I breaking free. Only now...because of her...'

'She cannot stay here. Her presence is destroying everything the council and I have been working so hard to achieve.'

'I love her' Cam uttered. 'I love her...' He balled his fists then, gripped by a sudden anger. 'This world is rotten enough' Cam growled at Brioke, 'without rotten people like you making it worse.' He narrowed his eyes in pure hate. 'You've forced me to turn again my brother' he said. 'You force me to hurt him...to push him away...to make me alone.....'

Brioke straightened.

'You belong to me' Brioke said menacingly as he approached him. 'You will do as I say' he spoke with surety. 'You always will.'

Cam backed himself against the wall. In his mind Cam counted the steps as Brioke descended upon him, squeezing his eyes tight shut, expecting to feel pain.

Instead Brioke caressed him, leaning forwards and kissing him, moving his lips down his neck as Cam turned his head away.

'No' he whispered.

Brioke acted as if he hadn't heard, grabbing Cam's wrist with one hand and pinning him against the wall, with the other hand, he moved to touch his groin.

'This body' Brioke smiled cruelly, 'belongs to me. Your body belongs to me...you are mine. You will always be mine.'

Cam began to tremble as he felt Brioke begin to undo his breeches, enveloped by a sudden wave of anger he tensed, growling and snarling he pushed Brioke away.

'No!' he cried. 'You will not touch me again!'

The silence echoed around the room.

Brioke stared back at him in disbelief for a moment, before his expression turned to anger.

'What?' he whispered dangerously. 'What did you say to me?'

'I...' Cam whispered, backing away.

Brioke advanced on him. Cam lashed out in panic, slapping him hard across the face, freezing instantly as he realised what he had done. Brioke instantly turned back to him, eyes wild, teeth bared and whole body shaking in raw fury. Still shocked at his own actions, Cam had no time to defend himself as Brioke swung a fist at him, hitting him hard right in the face. Cam fell back, rolling on his front and attempting to crawl away in panic, but Brioke stepped on his long trailing cloak, preventing him from doing so.

Cam jerked his head around towards Brioke just as Brioke swung a kick at him, catching him beneath the jaw. Cam bit his tongue hard, instantly tasting blood.

Cam had been beaten by Brioke before, but this time was different. This time Cam realised with horror as he curled up into a ball to protect himself, Brioke intended to kill him. This time the kicks were aimed at his head.

Cam's hand shot out to grab Brioke's foot in a vain attempt to try to protect himself as he fought to stay conscious. Brioke only jerked his foot back with ease, bearing over Cam and grabbing him by his hair.

Cam saw the ceiling briefly before Brioke slammed his head with as much force as he could muster against the stone floor, again and again.

He was only vaguely aware of the door opening nearby and hearing his brother's voice.

'Brioke!'

Cam felt the weight suddenly leave him as Brioke was pulled off him.

He slowly moved his hands beside him, pushing himself gingerly to his feet, he rose.

His eyes began to glow, a blinding white light.

He rounded on the figures behind him; both Brioke and Luke stepped back in shock at the sight of him, both crying out in fear.

Cam lunged for Brioke then, grabbing him by the shirt he began to attack, releasing all the rage and pain that had built up and grown and manifested inside him all these years. He took it all out on Brioke now, lashing out at him and everything around him, his magic spinning out of control.

As he attacked Brioke, tearing at his flesh with his bare hands, he wasn't aware of the storm he had created within the room around him. He wasn't aware of the gale that whipped at their clothes and hair, wasn't aware of the swirling snow which turned to sleet which turned to rain, wasn't aware of the fire and lightning thrashing in the air around them.

What he was suddenly aware of, was Luke as he grabbed him, shoving him back and away from Brioke.

'Leave him alone!' Luke hollered over the roar of the elements around them.

'YOU'RE PROTECTING HIM?!' Cam screamed as he backed away from him. 'AFTER EVERYTHING HE DID TO ME?!'

'You can't mend violence with violence!' Luke screamed back.

'I CAN!' Cam snarled. 'I CAN AND I FUCKING WILL!'

Cam backed further away as he spoke, straightening suddenly.

The ground beneath them began to tremble, then without warning the floor cracked and crumbled, becoming nothing but dust.

Brioke and Luke backed against the wall to avoid falling, as Cam, descended into the floor below, utterly destroying the stone around him.

Cam destroyed floor after floor, descending he drew closer to the ground, leaving behind him carnage and chaos.

Cam escaped the palace walls, marching out into the garden and heading for the stables, the storm and lightning raging around him all the while, and from his feet, with each footstep, was fire. It spread outwards as he drew towards the stables, burning everything in the garden that it touched.

Cam entered the stables and took a horse, mounting it and wheeling it around, he ignored the cries of the terrified beast as it reared up, pawing the air.

He managed to get control of it, forcing it onwards through the blazing inferno that surrounded. He headed towards the streets of the city before the palace, the wall surrounding the garden crumbled before him as if it were made of sand, and the gale that followed him, tossed the rubble in all directions.

Cam kicked the frightened beast onwards, escaping the palace and escaping the city, leaving behind all the pain and suffering. His magic quickly faded as he went, and the memory of what had happened along with it.

'I...' Cam uttered feebly as he looked around him. '*I did this?*'

'You killed people' Desmond said to him, 'when you collapsed part of the building. You killed them.'

'No...' Cam said backing away and shaking his head. 'No it was an *accident!*'

'They are *dead* because of you.'

'No!' Cam sobbed, falling to his knees. 'No it *isn't true!*'

His body hunched over as he began to cry into his hands.

'...it isn't true....' He whispered, speaking to himself now.

'This is wrong' Eden said turning to the others, 'all I see is an innocent boy condemned for something he did not do. I mean magic? Really now.'

'Look at the destruction around you' Desmond spoke aloud, casting his arms out to demonstrate. 'Do you not see?'

'I see the damage' Eden admitted, 'but there are a many number of things that could have caused this.'

Desmond narrowed his eyes, indicating the soldier beside him to take Cam.

The soldier advanced on Cam.

'I will show you his powers first hand!' Desmond said. 'You shall see for yourself! Then there will be no doubt, not when you witness his evil magic with your very own eyes.'

Cam was dragged from this room, flinching as the burly soldier grabbed him roughly by the arm and hauled him to his feet, biting his tongue hard to stop himself from crying out in fear.

He was taken to a room down the corridor from this one, feeling evermore afraid with every step he took.

Cam walked with the soldiers that accompanied him, scared and unsure of what was going on he didn't resist, fearing that if he did it would be worse for him. His bare feet were cold as he walked the silent corridor, the blood from his torn nails dried and crusted to his skin. At the end of the corridor, they entered a large room, followed shortly by the council members who trailed after him, protected by the soldiers. Many of the council members mumbled uncertainly, casting glances around them at the others to see what they thought of all of this.

Cam was taken to the back of the room where there was a chair, much like the one he had been bound to in the prison cell.

Cam began to struggle upon sight of it.

'No! Please! Not again! I'm begging you!'

He tried to resist them, tried to pull away, but he was no match for the strong man who forced him down into the chair and began to strap him to it.

Cam began to cry, his body trembling all over and his breath in short and shallow gasps.

The soldier stepped back.

Cam watched as the man retreated, withdrawing to the other side of the room to join the council members and other soldiers waiting there.

His eyes darted around at the faces of the men that watched him.

'W-where is Luke?' he stammered to them. 'Where is my brother? *Where is he?!*'

'Are you ready?' one of the soldiers asked the council members.

'Are you *absolutely* sure about this?' Storin spoke aloud unconvinced. Beside him Castello watched silently.

'Don't worry' Desmond answered confidently. 'You will see for yourself soon enough.'

Cam looked up at the man standing directly behind Desmond. His heart constricted as he recognised the scarred man as the one that had tortured him.

The memory suddenly came flooding back, and he felt his stomach began to twist and tighten painfully inside him as he hunched over.

Cam looked up again, as one of the soldiers pointed a loaded crossbow at him.

He began to scream, remembering Brioke suddenly who had done the same thing to him, that day he had been thrown down the stairs, that day before his coronation.

‘SOMEONE HELP ME!’

The soldier fired. The bolt struck the wall behind him. Cam struggled against his binds, crying and sobbing hysterically.

‘Is this really necessary?’ Rhona asked uncertainly. ‘I’m really not sure this is a good idea.’

‘Trust me’ Desmond told him firmly. He spoke to the soldier holding the crossbow. ‘Again.’

The man re-loaded the bow.

‘I’VE DONE NOTHING WRONG!’ Cam hollered. *‘PLEASE! WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?!’*

The soldier pointed the crossbow at him again and fired.

Cam flinched as the bolt bounced off the ground dangerously close to his foot.

Cam slumped forward, sobbing in terror.

The soldier reloaded the crossbow again, and fired for a third time.

Cam drew a sharp intake of breath as the bolt struck the wood of the chair beside him, just grazing his shoulder.

The wound began to bleed as Cam gritted his teeth in pain.

He tensed, and then slumped forward, becoming utterly still.

The others watched and waited expectantly.

‘What’s happened?’ Eden whispered. ‘Is something wrong?’

Cam lifted his head slowly then, his eyes burning with rage.

His lip curled in a snarl, and as the men watched, they saw with shock and astonishment as the bolt that had struck the chair and wounded Cam’s shoulder, jerked back sharply from the wood it was stuck in. Hovering in the air it turned to point at the men, then shot towards them and straight through the throat of the soldier that held the crossbow. The others all cried out in alarm, stumbling back away from the soldier who clawed hopelessly at his throat, before collapsing and dying where he fell.

The room began to buzz around them. The air felt suddenly heavy, and a great pressure descended upon them all. The two remaining bolts that had been fired slid across the floor as Cam drew heavy breaths, never taking his eyes off the men across the room from him.

And then he fell still without warning, body slumped forward and head hung.

The council members all stared at him in astonishment. After a time, one of them dared to approach the man who had held the crossbow. He knelt beside him.

‘He’s dead’ Castello remarked briefly before rising again, pulling the hem of his robes back so that the seeping blood would not stain his clothes.

‘Do you see now?’ Desmond said to the others speaking loudly and clearly. ‘Do you understand? He is a danger, we cannot keep him alive.’

‘So what is your plan for him then?’ Lamont asked.

Desmond regarded him coldly.

‘He must die.’

Cam was taken back to his prison cell where he remained for several days, in the cold and dark with barely any food.

On the last day, he was woken abruptly by a heavy hand slapping him hard across the face, so exhausted had he been; he had not woken at the sound of the prison door opening.

He was escorted out of the prisons, this time accompanied by twice as many armed guards as there had been before.

‘Where is my brother?!’ Cam croaked miserably at the soldier that had woken him.

‘Quite!’ He snapped, jabbing the blunt end of his lance in the back of Cam’s leg and causing him to fall a knee.

When he was down, the guard hit him again, this time jabbing him in the side and causing Cam to double over.

‘Enough’ another guard barked, ‘you don’t want to kill him before we get there do you?’

The guard grabbed him by the arm, pulling him to his feet and shoving him forwards.

‘Move!’

Cam stumbled forwards, wrists tied behind his back. He walked silently now, consumed by fear and in a state of shock.

He was led through the palace and outside, heading out of the grounds and through the streets to a place just beyond the palace wall, while all around him the crowd that had flocked the streets jeered.

Cam raised his head, his heart stopping in his chest at what he saw before him. A platform elevated above the heads of the people, and a stake where a person would be tied to and burned, where Cam would be tied to.

Cam bowed his head, beginning to sob.

They moved closer to the stake.

Cam was led up the steps to the raised platform, staring hopelessly down at the faces in the crowd before him, where he saw many different expressions.

One of the soldiers pushed him firmly back against the great pole that stood in the centre of the platform, as another behind him began to tie him to it. As this happened, the other soldiers began to stack bundles of kindling around him, so that the fire would light and burn quickly.

Cam stared unseeing at the floor of the wooden platform as they did this, experiencing a strong sense of unreality, of loss and despair. And the people, those that watched in the crowd, they were the faces of anger and fear. Who knew what these people had been told about Cam. Who knew what lies they had been fed by the council?

He would die here today, he knew this.

Cam tilted his head back to gaze at the palace, his heartbeat slowing as he recognised a figure standing on one of the balconies, staring down at him.

Luke stood leaning forward with his hands upon the wall, his expression unreadable.

Cam began to cry openly, his body shaking as his eyes met with Luke’s.

Luke...he thought. Oh Luke....

He hung his head, his black hair falling over his eyes. He barely heard the executioner who read aloud his crimes to the crowd.

How could this happen? Did Luke even try to protect me? Does he even care?

Cam raised his head again.

Luke.....are you going to just stand back and watch me die?

The executioner finished reading the list of crimes, glancing down towards the man standing on the ground beside the platform and indicating to him.

The man on the ground holding the burning torch stepped forward, and set alight the wood beneath the platform.

The fire caught quickly, the black smoke swirled in the breeze. The crowd watched as Cam tied to the stake began to choke, unable to breathe through the smoke and slowly losing consciousness.

There was commotion suddenly in the crowd. Up on the balcony within the palace, Miranda appeared then to stand by her son and watch events unfold, her expression impassive. Together from overhead she and Luke watched as smoke bombs were set off, sowing panic and confusion in the crowd. Guards shouted orders to one another, and from a safe distance, the council members observed in silence.

There was violence within the smoke, several dark figures moving swiftly, several soldiers falling dead.

By the time the smoke had cleared, the people saw that their king was gone. Cam had been cut from the pyre and carried away, there had been a fight, blood stained the platform as the fire burned ever higher. But by the time the guards gathered themselves to search for the culprits, they were already long gone.

Cam was taken from the city and to a forest nearby. Several decoys were sent riding in different directions to confuse the guards that pursued. But Cam for the moment was as safe as he could be.

The man that had rescued him, was an old soldier named James. He had carried him to a secluded part of the woods, where his sister, a healer a few years younger, waited anxiously nearby.

James dismounted his horse, carrying Cam to their hiding place, a secluded location that was easy to miss unless you knew already where it was, a small cave hidden in dense foliage beside a river. He lay Cam down on the ground in the cave, putting his ear over his mouth and listening.

‘He’s not breathing.’

Immediately James tilted Cam’s head back, lifting his chin. Pinching his nose he placed his mouth over Cam’s and breathed into him

Cam opened his eyes, sitting and up rising to his feet.

He looked about him, but saw nothing.

‘Hello.’

Cam started then. He thought he had been alone, but there was another figure here with him in this strange place. A figure dressed all in black, wearing a hooded robe and gloves to cover the hands, and a mask also, a mask with a long beak, and large round eyes like windows, through which nothing could be seen.

Cam had taken a step back at the sight of this figure, but his nerves calmed quickly, recognition sparking within him.

‘You again’ he said. ‘Why do I always see you?’

‘I don’t know’ the masked figure replied in a male voice. ‘Why do we always see *you*?’

Cam said nothing.

‘You’ve been through so much in your life’ the masked man said casually

‘Where are we?’

‘This is the inside of your mind’ the figure replied. ‘It’s a bit empty in here isn’t it?’ The figure said glancing either side of him at the blackness. He began to chuckle. ‘I’m just kidding. Think of this as being a part of your dreams. You can think of anything, anything you want, and it will appear.’ He hummed to himself. ‘Why don’t you imagine a giant flower, with bright pink petals?’

Cam blinked at the figure, then thought.

By his side appeared not a flower, but a figure, a figure that Cam knew well and despised.

‘Oh’ the masked figure sighed glumly. ‘*Him*. You think of him a lot don’t you, even in your subconscious.’

The masked figure waved a hand to the other figure dismissively, and Brioke’s profile and sneering face faded away.

Cam held himself, feeling suddenly dirty.

‘It’s time for you to return now’ the masked figure told him quietly. ‘You have to live. You have to fight on.’

‘What if I don’t want to live’ Cam argued, ‘what if I no longer want to be a part of this world?’

‘I’m afraid’ the figure replied slowly, ‘you don’t have a choice.’

Cam’s eye twitched.

‘You will wake soon’ the figure told him, turning and gliding away. ‘And we will meet again. We always do. And don’t forget...we’ll be watching.’

‘You always are.’

Everything began to fade to black.

James leant back slightly, listening for a breath and watching Cam’s chest. Still nothing.

‘Please help him’ his sister healer begged as she knelt beside them.

‘I’m trying’ James snapped before leaning forward again and placing his mouth over Cam’s. One breath, two breaths...he waited, watching Cam’s chest, before leaning forward again.

Cam’s consciousness was slowly returning, and gradually, Cam was becoming aware of the world around him. He felt something move inside him. Something was pinching his nose, and he could feel a sensation around his lips.

There it was again! A breath?

Cam opened his eyes, seeing a figure leaning over him. Cam could feel the stranger's breath inside of him. His eyes widened in horror, and as the figure leant back slightly, Cam lurched, rolling to the side away from the stranger, gasping deeply as he drew his own breaths now, coughing and retching violently.

Behind him he heard a female voice cry out in joy, clapping.

'He's alright!' she called. 'You did it!'

Cam felt suddenly violated; as the stranger had put something inside him he didn't want. Life.

Cam wiped his mouth, his breath beginning to steady. He turned back to look behind him, and saw two figures, a woman, and the man he had felt inside him.

'What did you do?' Cam gasped.

'You stopped breathing' the man explained. 'I had to save you.'

Cam glared at him, feeling anger, feeling hatred. He made to move, but was gripped by a sudden pain in his legs.

'What happened to me?' Cam asked, seeing his burnt and blistered skin. 'Gods it hurts' he moaned.

'You suffered a terrible ordeal' the man told him. 'It's lucky I was able to save you.'

'Don't touch me!' Cam spat as the man made to move towards him. '*I don't trust you.* I don't know who you are! Why did you bring me here? Where am I?'

'I'm sorry' the man said drawing back. 'My name is James. This is my sister Theliah, she's a healer' he explained. 'I brought you here; I saved you from the fire. They are surely looking for you now; you are here for your protection.'

Cam turned his body to face the pair, glaring at them head on.

'I pulled you from the blaze' James reiterated. 'I saved you.'

Cam looked down at James's body, seeing extensive burns over each arm. His flesh was blistered as Cam's was, and his clothes in places had been burnt away.

Cam hunched his shoulders, beginning to cry.

'Get away!' he howled as James threatened to touch him again.

'Cam. Look at me' James said grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him. 'LOOK AT ME!'

Cam trembled as he stared unblinkingly back at the man.

'I was a good friend of your fathers' James spoke firmly. 'I served beneath him before he died. He was a good king, but now he's gone the council are fighting for his place.'

'The council?'

'The right hand and left hand of the king' James explained. 'The council are not to be trusted; each side seeks to rule in the king's place. One side through forced ignorance and religion, the other through brainwashing and propaganda. Neither is what the people need. We *need* a king. We need *you*.'

'But I can't....' Cam whispered feebly back. 'I'm not strong enough....I don't know how!'

'You will learn how' James told him firmly, 'and you will grow stronger in time. I have every confidence in you.'

'What about my brother.'

'He has joined the council.'

‘Join the.....but why? The council is evil.’

James bit his lip in thought.

‘Where is my brother?’ Cam asked raising his voice. ‘Why isn’t he here?!’

‘Shhh’ James reached a hand forward towards Cam to cover his mouth. ‘Keep quiet; you don’t want anyone to hear us.’

‘Why isn’t my brother here?’ Cam repeated quieter now. ‘Why didn’t he save me?’

‘He did. That’s why you’re here now.’

‘Why was I tied to a pyre and set alight?’ Cam demanded. ‘Why was I sentenced to death?’

‘You’re brother is one man’ James reasoned, ‘in a council of many. He was overruled. He couldn’t overturn the sentence, but he and your mother made arrangements in secret for you to be rescued.’

‘Is that all?’ Cam whispered.

‘What do you mean?’

‘He is a prince’ Cam argued. ‘He would be king if not for me. Does that count for so little? Is that all the power he has within the council?’

James breathed a heavy sigh.

‘He has little power while you live’ James explained, ‘as you are the older twin, you were born first. And what little power he does have weakens when he joins the council, as he becomes part of a larger group, and his voice becomes weaker as he fights with those around him to be heard.’

Cam’s attention began to drift.

‘Luke is doing all he can’ James told him.

Cam’s eyes grew distant.

‘Now’ James went on, ‘we need to look at these injuries, but we need to touch you, we know you are afraid of this, but you *have* to trust us. Will you allow it?’

Cam didn’t answer, James took that as acceptance, and he and Theliah beside him began to work on his legs. They cut away the remaining fabric and examined the damage. The skin was horribly blistered, bright red and extremely tender.

‘Second degree’ James said offhanded as the pair worked. ‘The risk of infection is high unless we do something. It’ll take many weeks to heal I’m afraid.’

Theliah reached for a bag behind her, pulling out a jug and leaving the cave for a moment.

Cam sat back, resting on his elbows, waiting for her to return.

‘Are you alright?’ James asked him softly.

Cam nodded silently, unable to meet his gaze.

The healer returned shortly after, the jug now full of water from the stream.

James and Theliah washed their hands before proceeding, James lifted the jug above Cam’s legs, he paused.

‘This may hurt a bit’ he said. ‘Ok?’

Cam nodded.

James diverted his attention back to his task, tilting the jug and pouring the cool water over his legs.

Cam lay on his back as this happened, grinding his teeth and balling fists full of dirt in his hands. He let out a sigh as the jug was emptied, tensing again as James lifted a second jug.

‘It hurts’ he whispered.

James looked up at him.

‘I know.’

When the pain began to cease about fifteen to thirty minutes later, James stopped. He and Theliah began to clean the burns, patting the area dry with a gauze, their touch was very gentle. When they were done they applied cream, wrapping bandages over the burns loosely to avoid putting pressure on the skin.

‘I was going to take you somewhere’ James told him when they were done. ‘But your burns are too severe; we must wait for a day or two for you to heal, until you are ready to travel. You need to just lie here with your feet up. Can you do that?’

‘Y-yes...’

‘Just keep your feet up. That will help reduce any swelling.’

‘Where are you going?’ Cam asked him as James made to leave.

‘We’ll be staying here a short while’ James said. ‘I need to get supplies, food...medical equipment...I’ll be back as soon as I can. You just stay here and rest.’

‘Drink this’ Theliah told him handing him a glass of dark liquid. ‘It will help you sleep.’

Cam took the glass tentatively, staring at it.

‘Just drink it’ James told him.

Cam glanced up at him, then back to the glass. He brought it to his lips and drank deeply. Seconds later, he fell back against the soft earth, the glass tumbling from his hand.

He was now somewhere far away.

Sometime later James returned to change the bandages, soaking parts in warm water with a damp cloth before removing it.

‘You need to move your legs a bit’ James told him as he replaced the bandages with fresh ones, ‘or else your skin will heal too tightly.’

‘Are you a healer?’ Cam asked him.

‘It’s one of my skills yes’ James admitted, ‘but it’s not my profession.’

‘What is your profession?’

James smiled silently. ‘I am nothing’ he answered briefly, before rising and moving away.

Cam watched him go, before lying back against the floor of the cave. He breathed a heavy sigh and closed his eyes, allowing himself to rest.

It was the very next day, when Cam and James began their journey to the other place.

They shared the same horse, and rode through the forest for what seemed like the longest time. They rested often, and as Cam sat beside the fire in the dark evening, he couldn’t help glancing over his shoulder, eyes wide as he stared at the shadows the fire kept at bay.

The light from the little fire flickered between the columns of the trees, and Cam envisioned all manner of terrible creatures lurking in the darkness, feeling that if the fire were to die, they would leap out of the darkness and get him.

He jumped as a figure came marching towards him from the shadows, relaxing slightly when he saw that it was only James.

Cam let out a heavy sigh, leaning back and bowing his head.

James gave him a critical look, though kept silent, dumping two dead rabbits on the ground beside the fire.

He knelt. Cam watched silently as James brought out a knife, beginning skin the animals.

They ate little as they travelled, mostly only what James could find in the woods, mostly rabbit.

They travelled far; their destination was a long way away. For which Cam was grateful for.

The longer we travel Cam thought, the further away from the capital we get. I hope we travel forever.

But after long last, their journey finally came to an end.

James wheeled the horse around, coming out into a section of the forest that had been cleared. Before them was a great building. At first it looked like a manor, but when Cam looked closer, he saw that it was not simply a home, but a public house of some sort. There were people walking in and out of the building, hanging around the entrance in small groups, and wandering the grounds outside. The gardens around the manor, which was made entirely of wood, were flat and beautifully kept. Hedges cut into perfect symmetrical shapes grew either side of the smooth stone paths that wound around the open fields, vegetable patches and flower patches. There was even a rectangular pond, where a fountain trickled water in the centre, and at the edges, water lilies floated amongst lily pads.

All of this was hidden in the forest, built on the area of flat land where the trees had been felled. Now the flowers in the garden were able to receive the sun's warm glow, and they grew healthy and bright.

'What is this place?' Cam mumbled, bowing his head as he surveyed the building before them. Its windows were large, but he could see nothing within.

'It doesn't have a specific name' James told him. 'It's sort of like a guest house that cares for the sick, and rehabilitates broken minds. Many have suffered because of the wars that have been spreading, because of the damage the council has done to so many. This place is like a sanctuary. Many people suffer mental trauma because of what they have seen and lived through, others suffer physical injuries...some have even lost their whole families.'

As James spoke, Cam paid closer attention to the people that he saw wandering about the grounds. While most looked unremarkable, Cam did indeed see a few that stood out to him.

There was a woman trembling violently, holding herself and rocking back and forth. She was shaking her head and speaking hysterically to another woman seated beside her who appeared to be trying to comfort her. This woman appeared to be a healer, dressed in blue and white with her hair covered. As Cam looked further, he saw a few more of these figures dressed the same. There sitting by a flower patch was a man dressed in blue and white, speaking to another man who was missing a leg. Beside that man, was another, who was missing an eye.

So this place was built because of me Cam thought bitterly.

'So why have you brought me here?'

'Isn't it obvious?' James asked glancing back at him.

He tapped his heels into the horse's flank, and walked the creature to the back of the wooden building where there were stables.

James dismounted, turning to Cam and helping him out of the saddle. Cam moved gingerly with his injuries, but with James's help, managed to right himself. He looked about him.

The courtyard they were in was small, with stables lined up all around and facing inwards. James put the tired horse away in one of the stables, then returned to Cam's side.

'Are you alright?' he asked Cam.

Cam blinked, raising his eyebrows as he stared at a speck of dirt on the ground.

'Great' he droned.

James sighed in exasperation, strolling past him. 'Follow me' he mumbled back to Cam, 'the others are waiting for us, they already know of what's happened.'

Cam obeyed, following slowly after James in his footsteps.

They entered a small side door set into the building, and stepped into a quiet, narrow corridor. Cam shuffled back, as James closed the door behind him, marching off down the corridor and heading away. Cam hurried after him.

Cam took in his surroundings as they went. One room was where they washed clothes, another a dining hall filled with several long tables. Another room looked like it was meant for only relaxing, with a metal hearth, soft furniture and shelves full of books.

They passed through several rooms before being greeted.

'Ah!' said a figure as they came to the foot of the stairs that led to the next floor. 'You're here, at last.'

Cam gave only a half-glance towards the mature male figure dressed in blue and white, (though he didn't have his hair covered) before looking away. Behind him were three younger figures, all male.

'It was a long journey' James nodded to them wearily. 'We couldn't leave for a while because of how severe his injuries were' he said glancing back at Cam, who was staring at the wall.

'I'm just so glad that you are safe my king' the healer said to Cam. 'And I'm sorry for what happened. I'm sorry that they did that to you.'

Cam turned to face him at last, wearing a blank expression.

'May I?' the healer asked.

Cam didn't understand, and so he glanced at James.

'He wants to check your wounds' James told him.

Cam looked down.

The healer having received no objection stepped forward, kneeling before Cam and touching his leg.

'Get away!' Cam snapped aggressively, moving sharply back and snarling. 'Don't touch me.'

'I should have said' James told the healer wearily, who looked a bit shocked at Cam's outburst, 'the king has an aversion to being touched. And who can blame him for his mistrust...after everything that's happened to him? I'm sorry I should have mentioned it.'

'I understand' the healer spoke kindly, rising again to his feet. 'Follow me' he said to Cam. 'I will show you to your room.'

'M-my room?' Cam repeated, suddenly very suspicious of him.

'You will be staying here a while, where you will recover.'

'And then?' Cam asked.

'We've not thought that far.'

'It's alright' James reassured him, sensing Cam's hesitation. 'You will be safe here, we will look after you.'

Cam gritted his teeth, fighting back tears.

‘Come on’ James prompted. ‘It’s this way.’

Cam followed the healer and James up the stairs and along the corridor, stopping before one of the doors which looked identical to the ones lined up either side of it.

‘This is your room’ the healer said to him, opening it. ‘Room H.’

Inside the room was bare, with only a bed in the corner beside the large window, a bedside table and a larger table in the other corner, at which was a single chair.

Cam stared at it unimpressed.

‘You’ll be staying here’ the healer said to him. ‘If you ever need anything, there is always someone nearby who can help.’

‘Right.’

‘There is a bell’ the healer said indicating a red rope hanging beside the bed. ‘You can ring that in emergencies and someone will come quickly.’ He lowered his hand. ‘I need to look at your wounds’ he spoke seriously to him. ‘Will you let me?’

Cam fell silent now, staring at the healer with suspicion.

The healer glanced towards James.

‘Perhaps you would feel more comfortable if a woman saw to you?’ James suggested to Cam. Cam turned away.

He wanted to avoid all of them; he wanted it to all just go away.

‘Stay here in this room’ the healer told him gently. ‘For your own safety, I think you should remain. Food will be brought to you shortly. You must be hungry.’

‘I’m alright’ Cam replied reluctantly.

The healer bowed his head once. ‘A female healer will come for you shortly’ he told Cam. ‘We must leave you now.’

The two figures moved from the room then, leaving Cam behind.

‘She will be with you shortly’ the healer said back to Cam, pausing in the doorway. ‘Please, stay in your room.’

Behind the healer James stood, watching Cam silently.

The healer closed the door, and Cam felt a twinge of nervousness as he heard the sound of a bolt being slid across.

He realised he was locked in, and wondered suddenly whether or not he was safe here.

I suppose they wouldn’t go through so much trouble only to hurt me Cam thought. *And even if they did...do I really care anymore?*

It was utterly silent in the room.

Cam stared at the door for a long while, feeling suddenly very lost and out of his depths. This all felt so strange and foreign to him. So much had happened in such a short space of time. He had nearly lost his life not so long ago, and now suffered terrible injuries from which he was still healing. And now he found himself in this strange new place, all alone.

He moved away from the door, coming to the bed and lying down on it.

He felt uncomfortable as he lay there, staring up at the ceiling above.

He waited several minutes in silence, willing himself to fall asleep just to pass the time, but he was wide awake, and nothing seemed to be calming his waking mind.

A long time passed, then there came the sound of the bolt sliding across the door.

Upon hearing it, Cam was suddenly reminded of being back in the prison cell where he was tortured, and for a moment he felt terror as to who would enter through the door.

He stiffened, sitting bolt upright as the door swung open.

He watched as a young female healer entered. She was pretty, and looked to be about the same age as Cam.

Cam wondered then if the others had specifically chosen her for this, perhaps to make her more approachable to Cam.

The healer closed the door behind her with a foot, holding a tray in her hands, upon which was food and drink.

She sauntered up to Cam confidently. Cam watched her with caution, studying her, careful of her every move

‘Hello’ she beamed, grinning widely at him, acting as if she had only just noticed he was there.

Cam saw instantly that she was naturally a bubbly and friendly character.

‘My name is Lady’ the healer said to him. ‘You’re the king Cameron aren’t you?’

‘I am’ Cam replied solemnly.

Lady placed the tray on the bedside table beside him, turning to him and holding her hands together before her.

‘Are you hungry?’ she asked him.

Cam glanced with disinterest at the food and drink on the tray.

‘No.’

Lady bowed her head to him.

‘You’ve been here for nearly an hour now’ she told him. ‘I know you don’t want to be touched, but I really do have to check your wounds.’

Cam wouldn’t meet her gaze, instead chose to avoid her by paying attention to the tray.

‘The healer who welcomed you’ Lady told Cam, ‘his name is Andrew. He sent me here to check on you. If I don’t look at your wounds, then they may become infected and fester.’

‘Alright’ Cam sighed.

‘Will you follow me?’ Lady asked him politely. ‘There is a bath waiting for you.’

‘I’m allowed to leave my room?’ Cam asked her flatly.

Lady hesitated. ‘We only wish to keep you safe’ she told him.

‘Does my brother know I’m here?’ Cam asked her.

‘He...I don’t know.’

‘Is he safe?’

‘I assume so.’

‘You assume....?’ Cam raised his head. ‘You mean you don’t know.’

‘I can’t be sure.’

Cam bowed his head, feeling a lump in his throat.

‘I’m sure he is fine’ the young healer tried to comfort him.

‘How?’ Cam asked. ‘How can you be sure?’

She bit her tongue, unsure of what to say.

‘Why is this happening?’ Cam whispered, speaking to himself and looking the other direction. ‘Why isn’t he here? How do I know he’s safe?’

He tensed slightly as the healer reached for him, touching his arm.

‘Come with me’ she spoke slowly. ‘Everything will be alright.’

Cam rose, following her out of the room and down the corridor.

As Cam went, he found himself thinking how nice it was to leave. He had only been in that room for a short time, but already he was glad to look at different surroundings, and just to be somewhere else.

They only walked for a short time before stepping through another door, within which was bare, save for a wooden tub filled with hot water and steaming.

‘I’ll be back in a while’ the healer told him. ‘There are fresh clothes for you there’ she indicated to the side.

She bowed to him, before turning and closing the door behind her, leaving him alone.

Cam stared at the closed door, before turning back to the bath.

He approached it, unbuttoning his shirt mechanically.

He was desperate for a bath he realised, not even being able to remember when last he had one.

He slowly undressed, feeling the water which was warm, before slipping into it, tensing at the pain in his legs before relaxing again.

Cam let out a heavy sigh, closing his eyes, making the most of this one moment of peace and serenity.

He washed himself meticulously, scrubbing his body clean and washing his hair.

He got out when the water started to cool, and got dressed, looking at his reflection in the small mirror upon the wall. Cam leant closer to his reflection, running his fingers through his black hair, which was now clean, and wondering briefly what it would look like pure white. He had never had a good look at himself in that state. The only time he had seen himself like that, was when looking at his reflection in the water, the very first time it had ever happened.

‘How?’ Cam mumbled to himself. ‘Why? Why does it change?’

He stepped back, still looking at the mirror, at himself. His hair had grown longer, if he had brushed it forwards, it would have covered his eyes.

It had never been as long as this before. When he had lived in the palace it had been cut for him by servants often. A king was expected to have hair that was short and neat, not long and wild like the gypsies wore their hair.

But I was Cam thought to himself solemnly, *I was a gypsy, for a short time.*

Cam turned away from the mirror, waiting uncomfortably in the room for someone to come for him. Eventually they did.

There came a knock at the door.

Cam tensed slightly.

‘Who is it?’

‘It’s just me’ Lady’s muffled voice came through the wood. ‘Can I come in?’

‘Yes.’

Lady opened the door, stepping carefully in.

‘I’m here to take you back to your room.’ She smiled at him. ‘You look great by the way.’

‘It...does feel good to be clean again.’

She grinned wider at this. ‘I’m sure it does.’

She took a step back, moving out into the hallway.

‘If you would like to follow me...’

When they were back in what was apparently now Cam’s room, she asked him to sit on the bed.

‘I need to look at your wounds’ she said patiently to him.

‘I don’t have any.’

‘You have burns on your leg’ she told him. ‘Please. They could get infected. I need to make sure they heal properly.’

Cam reluctantly took his trousers off, keeping his undergarments on.

Lady knelt before him. She took off the wet bandages Cam had washed in, and cleaned his legs, drying them, then rubbing cream gently into his sore skin before bandaging them up again.

When she was finished, she paused, still kneeling.

Lady raised her head.

‘Cam’ she said to him. ‘What happened?’

Cam clenched his teeth, feeling suddenly very nervous and uncomfortable. But he forced himself to speak.

‘I was...sentenced to....be executed.’ He swallowed the lump in his throat. ‘They...tied me to a pyre...and.....’ he bowed his head, letting out a sob.

‘No’ Lady shook her head. ‘It’s not that. Your toenails have been ripped off.’

Cam didn’t answer, he couldn’t answer, he only froze.

‘Did they do this to you? The council?’

‘Yeah’ Cam whispered; his voice barely audible.

Lady rose to her feet. ‘I’ll bring you some food.’

She was only gone for a short time before returning to him, carrying a tray of food and drink.

‘You haven’t eaten or drunk anything yet’ Lady said to him, placing the tray upon the bedside table before straightening again. ‘You must be starving.’

Cam didn’t answer, and so she turned away.

‘Do you know where my brother is?’ Cam asked her as she made to leave. ‘Is he safe?’

‘I don’t know’ Lady answered, pausing at the door. ‘I couldn’t know.’

Cam bowed his head, heart tightening in his chest. He barely noticed her leave, barely heard the door close or the bolt slide across on the other side.

He glanced at the food and drink on the tray beside him, and turned away from it, lying on his side with his back to the room.

Two days passed.

‘He still hasn’t eaten anything’ Lady said to the head healer.

Andrew grumbled uncomfortably at that, scratching his chin in thought.

James turned to Lady. ‘Has he drunk anything?’

‘No’ Lady said to him. ‘Not a single thing. Cam hasn’t even drunk a sip of anything I’ve brought him since he first came here.’

The three of them fell into a tense silence.

‘Have you encouraged him to eat?’ Andrew asked Lady.

‘Yes’ she replied. ‘I have done so many times. But he adamantly refuses.’

Andrew sighed, turning away. ‘I hate to say this, but if he continues to even refuse drink, then he will die in only a few days.’ Andrew balled his fists in frustration. ‘I don’t want to do this, I don’t, but....’ He trailed off.

‘Do it’ James spoke firmly. ‘If he refuses his food again, I want you to make arrangements to begin.’

‘I can’t eat’ Cam said weakly. ‘I’ve nothing left in me....no will to live....no will to survive or see the next day.’ He closed his eyes. ‘I just want it to end’ he whispered. ‘I want it to all go away. I just want to stay here....until I feel it.’

‘Feel what?’ Andrew asked speaking slowly.

Cam opened his eyes, staring up at the dark ceiling above him.

‘Nothingness....’

Andrew rose from his seat. He turned and walked away.

Chapter Nineteen

The next time food was brought for him; there were several people who entered his room, not just Andrew.

It was usually Lady who brought Cam his food, but recently, Andrew the head healer had done so instead.

Andrew invited Cam to sit at the table, which he did. Then Andrew placed a plate of food before him.

It looked delicious. Smelt delicious. But Cam wasn’t tempted. He just sat where he was in silence, not eating.

Andrew pulled up a chair beside his, leaning against the table and watching Cam closely. He lifted the fork, picking a small piece of food from the plate and moving it towards Cam’s mouth to eat.

Cam turned his head away.

‘Cam’ Andrew said patiently. ‘You *have* to eat.’

‘I don’t have to’ Cam mumbled to the wall, ‘...if I don’t want to.’

He had become incredibly weak since he arrived at this place, the lack of food or water had caused him to be listless, and he couldn’t sleep, as he was plagued by nightmares.

Even in this short time here he had become skeletal in appearance, gaunt, with sunken hollow eyes.

Andrew let out a sigh in exasperation, dropping the fork and the food it carried back on the plate and straightening up again. He gave a nod to the men around him.

Cam panicked as the table was pulled sharply away from him and the surrounding men held him down, tying him to the chair with belts so that he could not move. Cam began to scream, his fear giving him new energy.

‘Don’t make this harder for yourself’ Andrew spoke calmly to him as one of the men handed him an item. ‘If you resist, it will only hurt more.’

Cam’s head was forced back by one of the men, and a steel gag placed over him, forcing his jaw open. He squeezed his eyes tight shut, tears of pain running down his cheeks as his gums began to bleed.

He tried to make a noise that only came out as a moan. Cam opened his eyes, seeing Andrew coming closer to him, holding the item he had been handed, which was a plastic tube.

Cam clawed the edges of the chair he sat on as the tube was forced down his throat. He thought suddenly of Brioke as food was passed down the tube, tears streaming down his cheeks as he endured the process.

When it was over, and Cam was alone again, he sat on his bed hugging his knees and crying into his arms.

It was horrible, all so horrible.

‘Luke...’ he sobbed. ‘Why is this happening to me?’ He held himself even tighter, digging his nails into his own flesh until it hurt. ‘*Where are you?*’ he snarled desperately through gritted teeth. ‘Why aren’t you *here*?!’

He heard the sound of the door opening then, glancing up suddenly he saw a figure enter his room. A figure from the past.

Cloaked in black with hood raised, hands gloved in black velvet, and face covered by a plague mask. There was a distinctive female aura about this figure, and unlike the other masked figures, this was felt very familiar.

A memory flashed suddenly in Cam’s mind, one he had until then forgotten.

The slice was deep and the blood ran quickly, staining the grass as it seeped out of the artery.

Cam’s eyes travelled down to the grass around her body.

Blood.

There was so much blood.

‘Auntie...’ Cam whispered.

The male hooded figure rose to his feet again, standing with his back to Cam. He replaced the mask back where it was, covering his face once more.

And then he turned fully around, suddenly staring at Cam head on.

‘It’s you!’ Cam gasped, the memory hitting him suddenly like a physical pain.

The figure wordlessly slid towards him across the room, towering over him like a building.

A frightening spectacle.

Cam stared wide eyed at the masked figure; he was utterly frozen, caught in uncertainty. Was this a kind figure like Auntie, or a cruel figure like the one that had killed her? Now he wasn't so sure.

'W-what are you doing?' Cam asked, voice shaking.

Without warning the figure lashed out, grabbing Cam by the wrist.

'What do you know of me?' the figure hissed in a male voice.

Cam drew a deep breath as if about to scream, but the figure clapped his hand over Cam's mouth, quickly silencing him, still holding his wrist with his other hand.

The figure grasped Cam's jaw firmly, nails digging into his flesh. Cam winced painfully at this.

'Shhh' the figure told him calmly, gazing at him through black eyes. The circular windows in his mask reflected back only Cam's terror. 'We don't want to startle the other patients.'

The figure paused; hand still over Cam's mouth to see if he would react. Cam remained obediently still, uncertain as to yet whether the figure was friendly or wished to cause him harm.

Seeing Cam's compliance, the figure slowly relaxed, releasing Cam's wrist from his grip and withdrawing his hand.

He straightened up.

'To answer your question as to what I'm doing here' the male figure said to him, 'I am here to see to your well being.'

'My...' Cam uttered, '...wellbeing?'

'The others like me have taken an interest in you' the masked figure told Cam casually. 'I have come here to...how should I put this...make you feel better.'

'Better?'

'Yes' the figure nodded, as if pleased their conversation was going somewhere, as if to him it felt like it was progressing. 'So tell me Cam' he tilted his head. '*How are you?*'

Cam only stared up at him blankly, unable to answer.

'I know' the figure smiled. 'You're worried for your brother.'

Cam's eye lit up at this and he suddenly tensed.

'Yes' he hissed eagerly. 'Is he alright?!'

'He's fine' the masked figure answered flippantly, '...I'm sure.'

Cam faltered.

'Is...is he alright?' Cam asked again. 'He's not hurt or anything is he?'

'Why would he be hurt?'

'He hasn't...' Cam began. He fell silent, biting his lip. 'Why hasn't he come to see me?'

The figure fell silent.

'Why was I captured and jailed like a criminal?' Cam went on, 'why was I sentenced to death? How could that happen?' he bowed his head, fighting back tears, looking up again as he managed to control himself. 'Was it my brother who organised the men to save me from the fire?'

'No' the figure answered.

'No?'

'It was your mother.'

Cam hesitated. 'My mother?'

‘She doesn’t love you’ the figure told him casually, ‘as I’m sure you already know very well, but she has more reach and influence in secret places than you are aware of. Not in the council, not in the open, but underground. She deals with criminals and outcasts and assassins, many of which are the dregs of your father’s army that existed long ago, the last honest men left in this world.’

‘But why would my mother help me if she doesn’t care about me, if she never loved me?’

‘Because...’ the figure replied sombrely, ‘you are still a person.’

‘And what about my brother?’ Cam asked, beginning to feel nervous.

‘What about him?’ the figure replied coldly.

‘Well...does he know what’s happened to me? Where I am?’

‘I’m sure he does’ the figure shrugged.

‘Well...does he not care?’ Cam asked tentatively. ‘I mean...is he worried about me?’

‘It wouldn’t seem so.’

Cam’s heartbeat slowed.

‘Did you hear what I said?’ the figure said again. ‘He doesn’t care.’

‘What...?’

‘Your brother doesn’t care about you. He does care about you. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t. Care.’

‘No’ Cam shook his head violently. ‘It isn’t true. It isn’t true.’ He gritted his teeth, tears brimming in his eyes. ‘My brother loves me!’

‘As you loved him?’ the figure challenged. ‘As you...loved him...?’

Cam’s whole body began to tremble violently.

‘He let you suffer. He turned a blind eye to your pain.’

‘No...’ Cam shook his head. ‘No...’

‘Not much of a brother was he? If he loved you, he would have protected you, as you protected him...from Brioke...’

‘SHUT UP...IT’S NOT TRUE!’ Cam was becoming desperate. ‘It’s not true...my brother is *good!*’

‘He didn’t try to save you when you ran for your life, that day you truly left the palace for the first time and ventured the world alone. He didn’t try to save you when you were captured and tortured. Remember the pain Cam? Remember what they did to you?’

‘Please stop it...’

He didn’t try to save you when you were sentenced to death, he didn’t try to save you when you were sentenced to *burn* alive in front of an audience.’

Cam grabbed his head with both hands, throwing his head back screaming.

‘*SHUT UP!*’ he cried. ‘*SHUT UP!*’

A strong wind began to pick up in the room, though the windows and door were shut, and his skin and clothes began to glow brightly, as they had done before. His black hair turned white, and his clothes lightened in colour until they looked almost pure white.

‘Not only does your brother not care about you!’ the masked figure hollered over the sound of the gale howling in the room, ‘but he hates you. He *hates* you. Without you, *he* is king. Your brother is evil, cruel even. He is glad your father is dead.’

Cam collapsed, falling to knees he curled up into a ball crying hysterically.

‘I hate being all alone...’ he sobbed. ‘Father.....I wish....I wish none of this had ever happened.....I wish that you were still here with me..... I miss you so much it hurts.....why....why did that have to happen....why did you have to *die*....?’

‘No one cares for you’ the masked figure continued, as the wind began to drop. ‘They’re all in it for themselves.’

Cam gritted his teeth. The figure’s words cutting into him like a knife.

He wished it would just end, that all of it would just end. He wished with all his heart that he would just die, so that he would no longer have to suffer, so that he would no longer have to feel *anything*.

‘Why?’ Cam whispered, tasting salty tears on his lips. ‘Father.....if you hadn’t died....none of this would have happened...none of this.....*Luke*.....we used to be so close....why do you hate me.....why do I suffer like this.....? My entire life has been nothing but *misery and pain*...’

He gritted his teeth then, a sudden anger rising in him.

‘I HATE HIM!’ Cam screamed suddenly, throwing his head back. ‘I HATE HIM I HATE HIM I HATE HIM!’

‘They’re coming’ the masked figure spoke suddenly, ignoring Cam and turning towards the door. ‘They have heard you.’

He vanished before the healers entered the room. Cam rounded on them; body hunched over and skin still glowing.

He fought off easily several of the healers, fighting until soldiers began to pour into the room; battling through the gale he had created which began to rise again with his anger.

He was only subdued when one of the soldiers struck him over the back of the head with a large and heavy object, standing just behind him and out of his sight. Cam collapsed, head spinning. He couldn’t resist as he was carried by the soldiers over to the bed. He turned his head to the side gingerly, as the glow began to fade, and his white hair returned to its natural black.

One of the soldiers grabbed his arms, and he felt something wrap around his wrists, his ankles too. He suddenly realised that they were tying him down.

Cam screamed again, struggling to fight against them. But his strength was greatly depleted now, and his efforts were weak.

Interlude start

‘What the hell was that?! You call that making things better?’ Reuben snapped the instant the masked figure return to them. ‘You did a terrible job. In fact if anything you made it worse, much worse. You may as well not have bothered.’

‘Hey’ the other figure snapped back. ‘Get off my case. If it’s that important to you then why don’t you speak to him yourself?’

‘I...’ Reuben began. He fell silent, glowering. ‘Why can’t you just make people lives better?’ ‘Seriously? You’re asking me that now? Come on Reuben, you know how things work around here.’

‘I know but...’ Reuben turned back towards the monitors, where he could see Cam struggling against the soldiers that fought to tie him down. ‘Hasn’t he suffered enough?’

The figure’s response was simple.

‘How boring life would be if only good things happened.’

The figure walked away.

Interlude end

Cam lay on the bed for hours, staring up at the ceiling with eyes bloodshot red, and his throat painfully sore. He tried to make a sound, but it only came out as a croak.

He felt so drained, emotionally and physically. And weak, he felt so weak, he doubted now that he could even lift an arm, but he was still tied to the bed where the soldiers had left him, for his own safety they said, and others. In his rage, he had hurt several healers and a few of the soldiers.

But as usual, that time of the day came around again, and the next his door opened, it was *them*.

The head healer Andrew, flanked by several others stood on the other side of the room, as the door swung shut behind them.

Cam heard the sound, and turned his head slowly from the ceiling, and towards them, staring at them blankly. Cam’s skin was pale and beaded with sweat, as he had spent so much energy in his magic. He looked sick, incredibly sick.

Andrew didn’t even ask him this time if he was willing to eat. He knew that he was not. He simply nodded to the men around him, who descended on Cam, untying him and pulling him to his feet, half-carrying him as they lead him to the chair. Cam let out a sob and a groan at the sight of it, but unable to resist them, did nothing as he was sat back in the chair. His binds were fitted, but this time not so tight. The man behind him held his head back as another fitted the steel gag over him, forcing his mouth open and keeping it that way. Andrew held the tube in a hand, approaching Cam from the front and lifting it as he did.

Cam began to cry silent tears as the tube was pushed down his throat. His hands were limp as they rested upon the arms of the chair, having no strength to even move at all. He watched as the liquid food was passed through the tube and into him. When it was over, the man removed the tube, and the steel gag was taken out of his mouth.

Cam slumped forward, feeling sick, but trying his best to keep it down. He knew that if he were to throw up, the process would happen all over again, and so he tried to stave off the feeling, as he gagged more than once.

He remained tied to the chair, watched silently by the men around him as they waited for him to digest his food. About half an hour passed before they untied him, leaving him alone once more.

Later that day, James came to visit him.

‘How could he...’ Cam whispered, ‘how could he do this to me?’

‘Luke does not know about this’ James told him. ‘He has no idea.’

‘He’s failing to protect me’ Cam hissed. ‘He’s....hurting me...’

Cam’s hand went to cover his face.

‘Luke has done what he can to protect you and get you away from the city,’ James explained, ‘after that he has no power. You are out of his reach. It is up to us now to keep you safe, and keep you alive.’

‘But I don’t want to live’ Cam breathed. ‘Not anymore. I’ve suffered so much...I only wish now for peace.’

‘Don’t say things like that.’

‘If I die...then my brother will become king....and everything will be alright.’

‘Don’t give up on yourself’ James told him sadly. ‘We’ve all worked too hard protecting you.’

Cam lay down on his bed, rolling over and resting on his side with his back to James.

‘Leave me’ he mumbled. ‘I wish to be alone.’

Cam listened as James rose from the chair, his footsteps receded and the door closed quietly.

There came the sound of the bolt sliding across on the other side, then silence.

Cam breathed a heavy sigh, closing his eyes.

When he next opened them next, it was still daylight.

He sat up, seeing the day outside his window was bright and still.

Cam turned over and swung his legs off the edge of the bed, resting with his elbows on his knees and head in his hands.

After a time he stood, moving across the room slowly and heading towards the mirror upon the wall. He observed himself; suddenly realising he looked paler, skinnier.

Sicker.

Cam reached up and touched his own face, his eyes were dark and sunken and he looked exhausted, he always looked exhausted nowadays, and was tired all the time.

The door opened suddenly behind him. Cam turned, gasping at the sight of the figure that stood in the doorway.

‘Luke?!’

Luke smiled, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him.

‘You look beautiful’ Luke told him as he stepped closer with a predatory smile. ‘A king. How about that.’

Cam said nothing, but continued to watch Luke closely, never taking his eyes off him.

Luke smirked, moving closer to Cam until he was standing before him.

‘You shouldn’t be running in the corridors’ Luke said. ‘You could get hurt.’

‘What?’ Cam gasped.

‘I want to see you in my office.’

Cam’s eyes grew wide, his throat began to dry and his body began to tremble.

Luke moved his hand to Cam’s face, as if to caress him, all the while Cam stared back with horror.

Suddenly Luke grasped Cam’s head roughly, slamming him into the mirror.

Cam stumbled back, howling in agony as the glass cut his eyes and face. Before he could recover, Luke shoved him hard. Cam fell to the ground on his front, his mind spinning in pain and confusion. He felt a hand upon his head then, pushing him to the ground before he could stand.

‘L-Luke’ Cam fumbled. ‘...Why...?’

He felt Luke’s body weight press against his, before he was pulled up, coming to rest on his hands and knees.

‘Stay where you are’ Luke growled from behind him, ‘or I’ll kill you.’

‘Luke’ Cam gasped as Luke began to tear at his clothes, grimacing in pain as his nails cut into him. ‘Stop!’

‘This body’ Luke smiled cruelly, ‘belongs to me. Your body belongs to me...you are *mine*.’

‘No...Luke...’ Cam whispered desperately. ‘Please...don’t...’

Luke thrust forward; Cam drew a sharp intake of breath, hissing between his teeth, jaw tight shut and moaning in agony.

It didn’t get easier. It never got easier.

Cam endured the process as he always had, feeling a hot pain thrusting inside of him again and again, willing it to be over as he suffered the ultimate betrayal.

When Luke was finished with him, he shoved him back to the floor; Cam lay on his front, whimpering, tears running from his eyes. Luke stood over him, smiling down.

‘There’s a good lad’ he spoke.

Cam sat bolt upright suddenly with a cry. He was lying in bed, his heart was racing and he was soaked in a cold sweat.

His hand went slowly to his head as he drew a shuddering breath.

‘A dream’ he gasped in shock at the vivid memory. ‘It was all a dream...’

The next day, he was visited again.

Andrew stood before him holding two things. In one hand he held a plate of food, in the other, a tube.

Andrew placed both items on the table before Cam and spoke.

‘Take your pick.’

Cam leant forwards in his chair very slowly, never breaking eye contact with Andrew.

He spoke.

‘Go fuck yourself.’

Andrew sighed, glancing to the men around him who descended on Cam once again, tying him down and forcing the metal piece into his mouth. Cam for the entire process never broke eye contact with Andrew as he pushed the tube down his throat.

Afterwards, James came to visit him.

‘He has forsaken me’ Cam whispered miserably, sitting up in bed. ‘My own brother...has forsaken me...’

‘That’s not true.’ James spoke harshly. ‘He wants you to live.’

But Cam didn’t hear him, so lost was he in his own thoughts and misery. He could taste blood in his mouth where the steel gag had cut his cheeks and tongue.

‘In pain.....’ Cam whispered, lifting a hand to his face and running a finger along the inside of his mouth. ‘I’m always in pain....’ He stared down at his finger, where he saw blood.

‘I’ll find a healer’ James suggested gently. ‘They can give you something to help you sleep.’

He stood up and left, returning shortly after with a glass filled with a strange liquid.

‘Here’ he said bringing it to Cam’s lips and cradling the back of his head gently, tilting the glass as Cam drunk the liquid tentatively.

Cam finished it all, his eyelids drooped and his body slumped. James put the glass down on the bedside table, laying Cam back upon the bed and draping a blanket over him.

Cam slept deeply for a long time, and he slept without dreaming.

A day passed before he woke, and when he sat up and glanced out the window beside his bed, he saw that the sun was further back in the sky than it had been before he went to sleep.

Cam was forcefully dragged from the bed and pushed down into the chair before the table.

Cam breathed slowly, staring at the two things that were placed before him. Standing at the other side of the table, Andrew waited expectantly.

Cam slowly leant forwards, reaching out for the plate and pulling it towards him, until it tipped off the edge of the table and onto the floor.

Andrew sighed wearily, he nodded to the men and they held Cam down once again.

Cam began to sob half-heartedly as the steel gag cut his mouth inside, tears rolling down his cheeks as the tube was forced down him. He was tired, so very tired.

Later when the others were gone and Cam was once again alone, he sat on his bed by the window, leaning on the windowsill beside him and crying into his arms. His mouth throbbed painfully, and his gums had continued to bleed for ages after.

His shoulders shook as his body was wracked with sobs, he cried for hours until there was nothing left inside.

When he lifted his head, his gaze drifted outside. There were people out there, milling about the garden below him. It was a pretty place, and Cam longed to see the garden up close, to touch the flowers, to feel the warmth of the sun, the breeze upon his skin. But he had not been allowed to leave his room, not until he was deemed fit enough to do so.

He stared down at the figures outside. They looked happy as they walked about and talking to each other. Cam watched them closely, one by one taking in their features.

And then he spotted a figure that stood out to him, like a shining beacon in a dark place.

He raised his head, blinking several times. His heart jolted as he recognised the figure in the garden below his window.

‘It can’t be’ he whispered in awe. ‘It’s *her*.’

Cam slept that night thinking of her. She had changed, had matured, had grown. He wondered if she would recognise him, as he recognised her.

Cam hugged his pillow, face screwed up as he thought of how fucked up his life had become.

‘Who did I piss off that badly in a previous life to deserve all of this? Maybe the gods are just toying with me.’

He sighed deeply, turning his head into his pillow and closing his eyes. It took him a long while to fall asleep, and when he did, he dreamed of horrible things. Hands reaching through the walls to grab him in the dark, their very touch burning his skin, scorching it. But it wasn't just a dream to him, he actually 'felt' the pain. 'No!' Cam had screamed. 'Get away from me!'

He woke abruptly and in a cold sweat, wide eyes darting all around him as he hugged the blanket to him, his breath short and shallow as he stared at the walls around him. But there were no hands there. Cam examined his own body where he thought they had touched him, seeing himself in the moonlight which shone through the window beside his bed. But he saw nothing, no burns.

'A dream' Cam whimpered, burying his face in his hands. 'It was all in my head...'

It was still late. He didn't know how late, but he could not sleep again that night, and stayed wide awake until the sun rose the next morning.

He was woken only a short time later, outside, the sun had only shifted a fraction across the sky.

'What time is it?' Cam mumbled to the men that stood before him.

'Nearly midday' was the response.

Cam stared at his lap, eyes sunken. Despite his lack of sleep, his body felt jittery, and he felt wide awake and full of energy.

He was sat at the table, staring before him as the men waited expectantly nearby, Andrew the head healer beside him.

The food on the plate he saw was bland and in small portions, nothing but chicken and rice with bread and water.

Cam reached a shaking hand towards the fork beside the plate; with his other hand he held the edge of the plate, pulling it towards him.

The chicken was cut up into tiny pieces, as was the bread.

Cam lifted his fork, shovelling some rice, and lifting it to his mouth slowly, leaning over the plate.

Andrew watched passively as Cam put the fork in his mouth, beginning to chew slowly.

For the longest time Cam ate, although there was only a small amount on his plate, it took him nearly an hour to finish. Halfway though he had dropped his fork, hand clapped over his mouth as he gagged suddenly, feeling as if he was about to be sick. Hand still over his mouth; he had glanced up at Andrew, who watched him without reaction. His eyes then darted down to the table, where sat the plastic tube. Cam had taken a slow and steady breath, willing the food to stay down, moving his hand when he felt ready, and continuing to eat.

By the end of it he had finished almost all of his food, leaving only a few scattered pieces of rice, and had drunk almost all of his water.

Andrew had let out a heavy sigh when it was all over, remaining for another half an hour at least to make sure he digested his food and didn't throw it up. When half an hour passed, he left, along with the other men. The empty plate and glass were taken away, and Cam was left alone.

I've broken my fast Cam thought, gritting his teeth and glaring. Then he turned his eyes to the window, gazing outside as he moved to sit on the bed. *Is she there?* He thought looking to the gardens below him. *Perhaps I will see her again.*

Chapter Twenty

A week passed, and Cam stared out of the window, looking out for Lucy, though he had not seen her again. He was bored out of his mind.

At one point there came a sound outside his door, the bolt being drawn across. Cam realised it was that time of day again, and as the door swung open, a single figure entered, carrying a large glass full of water, and a plate filled with food, a roast with meat and vegetables and lots of gravy. The silent figure placed the food and drink on the table and left again. Cam rose willingly from his bed and sat at the table, spooning several forkfuls of food into his mouth before drinking deeply, and eating some more.

About half an hour later, the figure returned to take the plate away, noting that he had finished everything. Cam watched Andrew leave, before turning back to the window, hearing the bolt slide back across his door, locking him inside again. A few minutes later, James entered the room, and Cam turned his eye onto him.

‘I see you're eating well now’ James noted.

Cam said nothing.

‘I think it’s time you left your room’ James continued.

Cam’s expression instantly lightened, and he couldn’t hold back the grin from his face.

‘Really?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Yes’ James replied. ‘Andrew says its time. But...you will be supervised by me until we feel you can be trusted. We’ve all put a lot of effort and risk into bringing you here safely, we don’t want you hurting yourself or running away or anything like that. Is that clear?’

‘Yes’ Cam nodded eagerly. ‘When can I leave?’

‘Now.’

Cam hesitated, suddenly uncertain. He rose to his feet then, watched closely by James as he moved slowly towards the door James had left open. James turned and followed Cam as he stepped out into the corridor.

Cam walked slowly, looking all around him as he went. The corridors were nice, so interesting and different to him after being stuck in the same room for so long. Everything he saw and felt was wonderful.

The end of the corridor split into two ways, one down another corridor, the other path led down a stairs.

‘Where...’ Cam asked uncertainly, ‘where can I go?’

‘Anywhere’ James replied flatly. ‘The responsibility to look after you has fallen onto me. I will follow you all day if I have to.’

Cam hesitated, glancing from one direction to the other as if confused. Behind him James let out a heavy sigh.

‘Go down the stairs’ he suggested, ‘the gardens outside are nice.’

Cam obeyed, and James walked behind him as he padded slowly down the steps. When Cam reached the bottom, he found himself in an entrance hall, so wonderful and large. He was just making his way across, eyes roving all around the hall around him, when he suddenly noticed a figure he recognised. The woman he had been watching, with hair like the setting sun. His heart jolted when he saw Lucy.

He froze on the spot, staring at her. She stood with her back to him a short distance away, speaking to a man who looked like a healer. Cam couldn't take his eye off her, she seemed so close to him, and he saw her, not through a window from a distance, but directly.

I could reach out and touch her Cam thought in panic. *Oh gods* Cam realised with a start, *if she turns around she'll see me!*

'Do you know her?' James asked quietly from behind.

'W-what?' Cam stammered. 'No.' He quickly looked away.

James glanced from Cam to Lucy, and back again.

'You love her don't you.' It wasn't a question.

Cam's eyes widened and his cheeks flushed, he avoided James suddenly, staring at the ground.

'I'll go speak to her' James said, beginning to move off.

Cam's arm shot out then, grabbing James to stop him.

'No' he hissed. 'Please...d-don't.'

James watched him with a passive expression, before turning back to him. Cam released him.

'Fine' James said carelessly. 'I know it's not my business, but if you really like her that much, just know you will achieve nothing unless you talk to her, at least try.'

Cam stared at him uncertainly.

'Now' James prompted, 'the gardens...'

That night the moon shone brightly in the clear sky, and in his room, Cam slept.

It wasn't long before he felt something moving in the sheets with him.

He tried to flee, but unseen forces pushed him back, holding him down, squeezing him; choking him. Cam gasped in panic, unable to breathe as he clutched at his throat.

Cam felt something tear at his clothes, touching parts of him that should not be touched.

He turned his head to the side, desperate, wishing someone would help him.

He saw his brother there. He saw Luke.

Cam opened his mouth and called out to him, but no sound came from his throat. He had stopped breathing he knew, but was somehow still alive.

Cam begged Luke, speaking to him through his eyes, pleading for help.

But Luke did nothing.

He didn't speak, he didn't move. He just watched.

Why won't you help me? Cam thought in his dream. *Why don't you care?*

Two days later, and Cam was allowed to wander without supervision.

'Can I go to the gardens?' Cam asked.

'You can do as you like' Andrew replied, glancing up from his work as he sat at the desk.

'You're allowed to go wherever you want now. You don't have to ask permission anymore, you have proven yourself to be trustworthy.'

Cam hesitated.

Andrew smiled kindly at him.

‘You can go wherever you want’ he told Cam again.

‘Yeah but...’ Cam began uncertainly, ‘...how far?’

‘You are free to come and go as you please’ Andrew told him. ‘As long as you return here every night, and keep yourself safe. There are watchmen all over this area.’

‘Watchmen?’ Cam echoed.

‘They are here for all of our protection’ Andrew said to him. ‘We hold many illegal people here, foreigners and so called traitors and heathens, the council would kill them all if they were found. As long as you don’t wander too far’ he said to Cam, ‘you will be safe under their watch. The watchmen never sleep. Day and night this place is guarded.’

‘Oh’ Cam mumbled.

‘Go’ Andrew encouraged. ‘Go to the gardens and speak to this woman, if you have the courage.’

Cam opened his mouth to say something, to protest maybe, but couldn’t think of anything to say, so shut it again.

‘Don’t think I don’t know’ Andrew grinned at him in amusement. ‘I have eyes and ears you know. Now go, go find this woman.’

Cam left the room, trailing out of the building and out into the gardens.

It felt strange to be free again, to be *truly* free. There were no worries for him now, and he felt safe with others watching over him, and...and....

Cam took a deep breath.

Brioke was long gone. The memories and the pain he had caused him were a thing of the past.

He can’t hurt me anymore... Cam thought to himself, and as he did, Cam began to feel something, a foreign emotion.

It was happiness, and hope.

It felt good.

Cam wandered through the garden for a long while, until he found what he was looking for.

From a distance he saw Lucy, her beautiful red hair shining in the sunlight. She was sitting and reading a book upon a bench a short distance away, the flowers in the bushes around her shone as they caught the light against the dark leaves, twinkling almost like stars in the night’s sky. She spent a lot of time in the gardens, he had learnt this in the days he had watched her through his bedroom window.

Not yet Cam thought. *I do not have the courage yet.*

He stepped back into the concealment of the bushes around him, and watched her from a distance, from a place he could not be seen.

He returned to his room when it began to grow late, and went to bed.

Cam felt a hand upon the back of his head, snapping his head forwards and into the mirror.

A blinding pain shot through him then, and Cam saw only a white flash erupted before him, the pain he felt in this nightmare felt as real as it had when it had actually happened to him.

Cam screamed, but no sound came to him.

He was forced to the ground, still in terrible agony.
He began to cry as he felt familiar hands tearing at his clothes, gritting his teeth at the familiar sensation as something was thrust into him.
It was the same pain and horror as before. It would not go away.
Cam woke with a start, covered in a cold sweat.
He let out a heavy sigh when he began to calm, hand going to his head.
'Why am I still suffering like this? He whispered as his hands shook. 'Why am I still thinking of these things? Brioke cannot hurt me here.'
But even as he spoke these words, he did not believe them.
Brioke has scared me forever.....he will follow me wherever I go.....

Interlude start

Many days ago

Bill burst into the room, breathless and red faced.
'They're coming!'
Dee had whipped around as he entered the room, shaking with terror. Her three sons, Vincent, Daniel and Roland were gathered around her, and her only daughter Lucy, who clung to her mother fearfully.
'We have to go now' their father hastened. As he spoke, all of them heard crashing coming from downstairs and shouting as the soldiers stormed their house.
'Go!' Bill screamed at his family, grabbing a staff beside the door and turning towards the stairs, turning his back on them as he faced the coming soldiers.
Dee ushered her children away, voice trembling as she spoke to them.
'Hurry' she panicked, fingers slipping on the window as she opened it. 'Go go!'
Daniel and Roland climbed through the window one after the other.
Dee ignored the sounds of shouting as the soldiers reached the room. She ignored the strangled cry, the sound of swords singing, and what sounded like a body falling to the floor.
She followed after her daughter Lucy as they climbed through the window, escaping the soldiers who sought to murder them.
Vincent who remained in the room rounded on them, drawing his weapon to bide time for his family as they escaped.
As Dee clambered through the window, she turned to glance back at the room; jerking her head back just in time as one of the soldiers fired a crossbow at her, missing her by inches. She stumbled, falling out of the window and onto the roof just feet below. Lucy reached out to grab her as she scrambled to her feet, running after Daniel and Roland who led the way.
'Where are they?!' Roland called back at his mother.
'No!' she only called back with tears in her eyes.

Roland turned his head away, facing ahead again and gritting his teeth.

Crossbow bolts bounced off the tiles around them. Daniel stumbled suddenly, crying out in pain as one hit him.

‘Come on!’ Dee screamed at him in terror, grabbing him and dragging him forwards.

Beside them Lucy dared to glance back, she drew a sharp intake of breath as a bolt headed directly for her, she was frozen in terror. But the bolt stopped suddenly in midair, inches from her face. It hovered there for a moment, before falling and rolling down the tiles and off the edge of the roof.

She was not able to think about this further, was not able to process the strangeness of what had just happened. She was pulled away again, as Dee dragged her onwards, pulling with her Daniel who hobbled on his injured leg.

They came to the edge of the roof, slipping down into the alley and out of sight from the window through which the soldiers shot at them at.

They paused for a moment to gather themselves as they stood. Daniel moaned then, hand going to the back of his leg, his body trembling in shock as he felt the shaft of the bolt protruding from there.

Roland reached out to him, grabbing the bolt without pause and jerking it out of his body. Daniel gasped in pain, hunched forwards

‘Come on’ Roland said to him, voice husky as he held back his grief at the realisation that his father and brother Vincent were dead. ‘We have to get away from here!’

They ran through the street, heading away from their home, which was now lost to them.

‘Where do we go?’ Roland gasped to his mother.

‘Away’ Dee sobbed. ‘Just away!’

They all skidded to a stop then as they rounded the corner. The soldier didn’t even pause. His raised crossbow fired point blank into Roland’s chest.

Roland stumbled, falling back and dying in mere seconds as the bolt had struck his heart, blood seeping out of his chest.

Dee backed away, screaming in horror at the sight and pulling her remaining children Daniel and Lucy to her. Daniel pulled away from her suddenly, making a start for the crossbow as the soldier began to reload it.

They fought for a moment, the soldier drawing his sword and stabbing him right the way through.

He jerked the blade back, and Daniel collapsed before him.

Dee began to cry openly now, hugging Lucy to her as the soldier stepped over the body of her dead son, advancing towards them.

The soldier grabbed Dee by the throat, pulling her towards him and driving the blade through her too.

Lucy stepped back, watching as her mother was thrown aside. She glanced at her mother’s dead eyes now, open and unseeing, before looking back at the soldier.

Consumed by shock, everything seemed to move slowly for her, none of this felt real anymore.

The soldier advanced towards her, sword raised, she could see clearly blood smeared on the blade. It stood out to her. Her mother’s blood, mixed with her brother’s...

Lucy backed herself against the wall, too frightened now even to run, frozen with terror, she could only watch.

The soldier stood over her, drawing the sword back to strike.

Lucy clawed at the stone below her, balling her fists.

She screwed her eyes tight shut, silent tears rolling down her cheeks. She opened them again when nothing happened, looking back at the soldier who remained standing over her.

For the longest time he didn't move.

And then he lowered his sword, straightening up again.

The soldier without a word or explanation, simply turned and walked away.

In the other world, the masked figure removed his hand from the panel before him.

He raised his head back up to the monitor, watching the terrified young woman in the streets.

'What are you doing?' Tiara asked beside him.

Castello turned to her, seeing her dressed in her black robes, but without her gloves or mask.

'Nothing' he replied casually, looking back to the monitors.

'Isn't that Lucy? The woman the prince likes?'

'It is. And he is a king now.'

'Why are you killing her family?' she asked.

'Because' the male figure replied casually, 'she has no other family' he continued, reaching forwards again and pressing several different buttons. 'Far away from the city is a refuge, hidden deep within the forest far away, a house of healing if you like, a place where people who are injured mentally and physically go. The queen is planning to save her son's life.'

'Oh yes' Tiara said, pulling from her cloak a pack of cards and sifting through them. 'Didn't we give up on him? He was sentenced to death wasn't he?'

'Yes' Castello answered. 'But his mother is planning to save him.'

'I thought she didn't care.'

'She cares a bit.'

'Did *you* make her come to this decision?' Tiara asked, stepping forwards and watching on the monitor as Lucy turned and wandered away from the scene of carnage, leaving the bodies of her beloved mother and brothers behind.

'No' Castello answered. 'Neither myself nor any of the others led her to this decision. She did this herself.'

'Hm. I guess she does care for at least one of her sons after all.'

'Of course she does' Castello answered. 'Remember how she killed Brioke when she learnt of what he had done?'

'Yes' Tiara nodded absently. 'She murdered him herself, with her very own hands. That was very bold of her; perhaps she would have made a suitable member of our eight.' She smirked, glancing back to the monitors. 'So why are you killing Lucy's family? What have they got to do with Cam?'

'When Cam is rescued, he will be taken to this refuge in the woods, the place of healing.'

'And that is where Lucy will be going too after this' Tiara finished flatly. 'I see.'

'They have known each other since they were very young, and have been drawn to one another. I believe that if the circumstances are right, the two could become lovers.'

'And why would you want that?' she asked him.

He shrugged. 'So much bad has happened to Cam. I think he deserves to get what he wants. At least some of what he wants...for now.'

'So he wants to see his old love again.'

'Yes.'

'So you murder her whole family to do it?'

'Yup' Castello answered happily.

'Twisted' Tiara mumbled to herself, flicking through the deck of cards she held.

A third figure entered the room then.

'Hey guys' Vergil said sauntering into the room. 'Whacha doing?'

'Castello is just tormenting innocent people again' Tiara answered casually.

'Isn't that Cam's childhood sweetheart?' Vergil asked, seeing Lucy on the screen.

'Yup' Castello answered again in a merry tone.

'You murdered her family?' Vergil gasped as he saw the scene more clearly, grinding his teeth in fury.

'I sure did' Castello replied.

'Why?' Vergil glared. 'Why would you do that?'

Castello stared back at him, blinking in surprise.

'Don't tell me that you actually care for him.'

'I...' Vergil replied, suddenly hesitant.

'He's just a toy' Castello told him. 'Just like the rest of them.'

'No' Vergil shook his head. 'No. This one is different.'

Vergil suddenly turned on his heel and stormed off. Castello and Tiara watched him with curious looks as he went away.

Several days later, Lucy reached a secluded spot hidden deep within the woods, and was welcomed by the healers.

She was taken into the manor, where she began to recover.

Interlude end

Cam had been watching Lucy for several hours now, trying to sum up the courage to talk to her, to even approach her. He feared even being recognised by her.

Why am I so afraid? Cam thought angrily to himself. *I want her to know who I am, so why do I feel this way?*

But he knew the answer already, even as he asked himself.

It's because I truly care for her, because I truly love her...

But would she accept me...?

The days were beautiful here, and she spent a lot of time outside. It was summer, and at this time the sky was always clear, the air was always warm and comfortable.

Most of the time she would sit beneath the shade of the trees, either reading, or sometimes speaking to the other people who shared this space with her. Cam had wondered more than once, what she was doing here, and why she was not with her family.

Where are they? Something must have happened to them.

He watched her now, sitting on the other side of a hedge and staring through the leaves at her. She was beautiful, she was so beautiful. Her hair was shorter than it was before, the bright orange colour shining in the sunlight. She was slender, now having the body of a mature woman who had finished growing into her figure. Cam thought briefly of the day he had first met her, back when they were both children. Things were so different back then, and they had both changed drastically from the selves they used to be.

She had always come back to him in his thoughts. Just when he thought that he might never see her again, she would suddenly appear.

Why? Cam thought. It's like we're being drawn together.

It was late in the day by the time he summed up the courage to speak to her.

When he approached her, she didn't seem to recognise him. Cam wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. Perhaps she did recognise him, and was just choosing not to say.

'I.....hi.'

She just stared up at him.

'I'm...Cam' he told her awkwardly. 'And you're Lucy.'

She didn't answer for a while, just stared up at him with large eyes.

'Yes' she spoke at last. 'That is my name.'

Cam's heart skipped a beat, his stomach lifted at hearing her actually speak to him.

'The healers t-t-t-t-' Cam ground his teeth, turning away and glaring at the floor, tears of frustration in his eyes. 'Sorry' he mumbled back to her, his nerves failing him.

He strode away before Lucy had a chance to speak, vanishing as quickly as he could, and leaving Lucy to stare after him in uncertainty.

'Please!' Cam begged, though he knew it was useless. The figure that hurt him now did so for pleasure, and not for anything else. 'Please stop!'

Brioke drove his foot hard into Cam's stomach again, kicking and punching him over and over again.

When he was done, he grabbed Cam, lifting him by his hair and throwing him over the table.

Cam did not resist as he heard a belt being unbuckled, did not react as his clothes were pulled away. He just remained lethargic and resigned, and Brioke yet again had his way with him.

Cam woke abruptly, heart pounding painfully in his chest as his mind began to piece together what had happened.

It had been another dream, again.

Cam stared up in silence at the ceiling for hours, as minute by minute, the dream slipped away from memory.

The morning was still hours away, and when it came, he ate breakfast without speaking, and then quickly went away.

Later that morning, as he was sitting on the steps before the manor, he saw a young man staring at him.

The young man, looking to be about the same age as himself was extremely handsome.

Cam's gaze lingered on him as the man stared back. Cam began to feel slightly nervous.

The man, who had been sitting on a bench in the garden a short distance away, rose to his feet.

Cam's nerves increased at the man approached. He stood before him, and smiled.

'Hello.'

Cam noticed suddenly that the man's canine teeth were sharp.

'Hey' Cam mumbled back.

The handsome man knelt before him so that he came to Cam's level, resting on one knee and leaning on an elbow, he tilted his head, surveying Cam and looking at him closely.

Cam leant back, gritting his teeth and glaring as he blinked several times, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable and suspicious of the man.

'I'm glad to see you seem to be doing ok here.'

'What?' Cam asked shortly.

'The war' the stranger went on, 'the suffering...it has had such a terrible effect on so many people. That person' he said, turning towards a man who sat alone on the other side of the garden, a man with a distant gaze, and his eyes wide as if in shock. 'He was forced to torture and kill his own family.'

The stranger turned back to Cam.

'You're the king' he said. It was phrased as a question, but spoken as if the man already knew, though Cam answered anyway.

'I am' he said. 'But it's not as if it's a big secret' he added in a grumble. 'Everybody here knows. But people just leave me alone...mostly.'

The stranger smiled at this, though Cam did not know why.

'My name is Vergil' the stranger told him. 'I think you're very handsome' he said to Cam.

'My family lived a long time ago' Vergil was saying to Cam as they walked side by side through the quieter parts of the garden. 'I was taken away from them when I was very young. My family were different from the people around us, and due to certain circumstances, the people in the town where we lived turned against us. My mother and my father were both killed trying to protect me and my older sisters. We managed to escape the house, and survived for weeks after that. But we didn't realise that they were still after us. My oldest sister was killed first, when she went away to get some water, then my other sister was killed two nights later when they found us in the woods. I was captured by the people and brought back to the town to face charges. All of them ridiculous...I was just a boy after all.'

Cam watched him closely as he spoke, he didn't say anything, but was listening intently.

'I was originally sentenced to be burned at the stake, but certain folks who supposedly sympathized with me, stepped forward and spoke out to give me a more lenient sentence.'

Instead I was chained to a post at night, and left outside the town to be killed by the wolves that lived in the hills nearby.'

'We have no wolves around here' Cam said to him.

'My old home was very far away' Vergil replied.

Cam turned away. 'So what happened?'

Vergil smiled to him, before facing ahead again. 'I managed to fight the wolves off myself. I pulled free the post that held me to the ground, using that and the chain that bound me to it to defend myself. I managed to kill two. Thankfully it was a small pack, and I managed to survive the attack.' He smirked to himself then. 'I was still chained to the post, and the post was heavy, very heavy for a boy so young. I walked for hours carrying it with me, but after a time...I managed to break my own ankle to free myself. I'm sure you can imagine how unpleasant that was for me.' He smiled again. 'After that, I survived in the wilderness for three weeks, until I was found by another of my own kind.' He nodded then. 'I was taken in by this man who was a teacher. My broken ankle which had healed abnormally was re-broken again and properly set, so that it could heal normally. After that, I began a new life under my mentor. He taught me much, and by the time I was mature, I had achieved more in a few short years than most kings had in their lifetime. I became a living legend. But what I did, would take too long to explain.'

'Then why are you here now?' Cam asked him, genuinely interested.

'My life took another direction' Vergil answered simply. 'I was taken in by another family, and that is where I live now.'

'Do they know you're here?'

'Some might. We're not terribly close.'

Cam looked away.

'Those townsfolk' Cam began, 'why did they treat you so horribly?'

Vergil's hand went to his mouth then, and he unconsciously touched his sharp canine teeth.

'Sometimes' he replied, 'people just don't like you...just because you are different.'

'Am I different?' Cam said, sounding as if he were speaking to himself.

'It depends on how you see it, on how other people see it' Vergil replied. 'To ask such a question, is like asking whether or not you are normal. There is no clear answer.'

Cam stopped walking then. His gaze drifted past Vergil and over his shoulder, to something of interest behind him.

Vergil noticing this, looked back.

'Oh' Vergil said. 'It's her.'

He faced Cam again. 'That's Lucy isn't it? She's always stood out because of her hair.'

'Yeah' Cam mumbled weakly. 'Do you know her?'

'Of a sorts' Vergil said looking away, 'although, she doesn't know me.'

They continued to walk.

'I think I will stay here for a while' Vergil said absentmindedly to himself.

'Why?'

'Because' Vergil replied simply, a smile playing about his lips, 'I quite like it here. Don't you?'

They stopped before a small tree, one of many within the garden. Vergil reached out, plucking one of the flowers from the tips of the branches and bringing it to his lips.

‘Beautiful’ he sighed, breathing in the scent of the flower with a heavy breath. He opened his eyes. ‘I’ve always loved flowers. They are...special.’ He lowered his hand, letting the flower fall to the floor where it landed gently on the grass. ‘I would like us to be friends’ Vergil said to Cam out of the blue. ‘Is that something you might want?’

Cam blinked in surprise, staring back at Vergil uncertainly.

‘Friends?’ he repeated. ‘With me? But...why would you want that? I’m no one special.’

Vergil smirked at this, tilting his head back towards the clouds.

‘I’ve just gotten here’ Vergil told him. ‘I don’t know anyone here.’

‘What about your family?’ Cam asked him. ‘Won’t they miss you?’

‘No’ Vergil mumbled. ‘They won’t. We’re not...’ he paused, thinking of the right words.

‘We’re not close like that’ he finished

Vergil straightened, turning his back on Cam then, staring away into the garden.

‘I saw a pond at the bottom of this garden’ Vergil said. ‘There are the prettiest little fish in there, golds and blacks and whites and silvers. Would you mind if we go and see them?’

Cam paused.

‘It’s ok’ Vergil said to him, noticing his hesitation. ‘I just want to look at the fish.’

Cam stared back at Vergil reluctantly. He turned away, glancing back at the building behind them.

‘Are you afraid of me?’ Vergil asked as Cam looked back at him.

‘No’ Cam answered meekly.

‘Then you’re nervous of strangers?’

Cam avoided his gaze, instead staring at the floor and swallowing the lump in his throat.

‘I’m not going to do anything’ Vergil laughed. ‘Don’t you trust me?’

‘No’ Cam replied flatly. ‘I don’t know you.’

Vergil hesitated, before smiling widely again.

‘I suppose you’re right’ he answered after a time. ‘We all have thorns in our past, things that have hurt us, dark marks that shadow our present.’

Cam watched him closely.

‘It’s just to the bottom of the garden’ Vergil said. ‘I just want some company. Please will you join me?’

Cam let out a breath. ‘Fine’ he said. ‘I’ll come with you.’

‘Good’ Vergil replied looking genuinely pleased. ‘Just to the bottom of the garden’ he pointed, ‘and then I promise to leave you alone, at least for today.’

‘Alright’ Cam repeated, ‘just to the bottom of the garden.’

‘It’s over there’ Vergil said pointing. ‘I’ll lead the way.’

Cam hung back for a second, before following after him, walking a few steps behind Vergil who led the way.

They walked in silence, only once did Vergil glance back towards him to make sure that he was following, and Cam was sure he saw a smile.

‘There’ Vergil said extending his arms out happily when they had reached the pond. ‘Fishes.’

Cam approached the pond tentatively, leaning forwards to get a better look inside at the dark waters.

The pond was not a natural one, but one that had been designed. Its stone wall was built upon a raised platform, and all around it, wide steps led right up to the wall.

Cam moved forwards, resting on the steps and leaning forward to look over the wall. He put his fingers into the cool water. Immediately the fish nearest all swam to him, nibbling his fingers, thinking it was food.

Cam smiled weakly to himself as they tickled him.

‘I’ve always loved fish’ Vergil was saying. ‘They’re so pretty.’

‘I’ve never seen a pond like this’ Cam spoke quietly under his breath. ‘We never had one where I used to live.’

Vergil said nothing.

‘I’ve never really had any pets’ Cam went on. ‘The only thing I cared about really was...’

He trailed off, and never finished his sentence.

‘Tell me more about Lucy’ Vergil prompted.

‘Lucy?’ Cam mumbled. ‘I don’t really know much about her. I first met her many years ago when I was very young.’

He stopped there, but Vergil continued to watch him expectantly.

‘Go on’ Vergil encouraged. ‘Tell me about when you first met her.’

‘Well...’ Cam began. ‘I don’t really remember much. My brother and I...we left home and went out into the streets. That’s when I first saw her. She was just a child, and so was I, we must be about the same age. She always stood out because of her hair, a beautiful and vibrant red...’

Vergil smiled silently as he listened.

‘I...I really like her, and seeing her again years later, here...in this place.....’

Cam bit his tongue, staring off into nothing.

Vergil tensed suddenly, unfolding his arms and taking a step back.

‘What?’

‘The pond’ Vergil hissed, raising a hand and pointing.

Cam looked around, heart leaping to his throat. He saw the fish scatter as frost crept along the surface of the pond, creeping up the walls and down the steps to the grassy floor of the garden around.

‘Oh no...’ Cam whined, rising and stepping back. The instant he had noticed, it began to get worse. ‘I can’t stop it!’ Cam cried, becoming hysterical.

The air grew heavy, and cold. Their breaths formed as mist before them.

‘Extraordinary’ Vergil sighed, gazing all around him at what was changing, not in the least bit phased by what was happening. ‘What an incredible power...’

‘I don’t know how to control it’ Cam sobbed, looking behind him as the air grew colder still.

It began to snow.

‘Just be calm’ Vergil told him in a level voice. ‘You’re getting emotional. It’s what’s triggering it.’

Cam bowed his head, beginning to tremble. He closed his eyes.

‘Calm’ Vergil spoke more firmly now. ‘Don’t let it control you.’

Cam hunched his shoulders, hugging himself and balling his fists. He took a slow breath, and then another.

The next he opened his eyes, the frost was gone, along with the cold.

The air around them was back to the way it was before, and there was only Vergil standing there before him, smiling widely.

‘Good’ he simply said. ‘Good.’

Later that day, Cam sat alone in his room upon the bed, staring out of the window for the longest time, thinking about how strange that man was.

‘He didn’t seem scared of my powers’ Cam mumbled to himself. ‘He didn’t even seem surprised at all.’

When he did glance Vergil through the window in the garden, Vergil looked up at him. Seeing him, he smiled and waved.

Cam tensed slightly, waving awkwardly back in response.

Vergil lowered his hand, he turned and walked away. Cam stared after him, thinking to himself.

He’s so strange. There’s something off about him. He doesn’t seem put off by me at all.

Cam spent many days in his room after that, wishing only to be alone with his thoughts. For the longest time he stayed on his bed, arms folded behind his head and staring up at the ceiling. Here he stayed, and here he thought about all the people he once knew. Luke, Valery who was supposed to be his wife and queen, his mother, his father, Durril, Elaina.

‘I wonder what they’re all doing now’ Cam thought aloud to himself. ‘I wonder if they’re thinking of me.....I hope they’re all alive.....’

He gave a heavy sigh, closing his eyes and becoming still.

There was a knock at his door several minutes later. Cam opened his eyes and sat up in bed. The sudden noise in the quiet had frightened him a little, and as he stared at the door, his heart beat a little faster in his chest.

‘Who is it?’ he called.

The door opened slowly, and Cam saw Andrew standing there, lingering on the threshold for a few seconds, before stepping in. He placed the tray of food he carried for Cam upon the table nearby, then turned to him.

‘I’m glad to see you’re doing well’ he said to him.

‘Yeah’ Cam mumbled. ‘I guess.’

‘Still’ Andrew added casually, ‘you’ve not left your room for quite some time. I hope everything’s alright.’

Cam glanced up at him, tensing slightly. ‘Y-yes’ he said hastily.

‘Then what’s wrong?’

‘I just...’ Cam looked away. ‘I’m worried about.....the people I once knew.....people who were dear to me.’

Andrew nodded in silent understanding.

‘There is a man that’s been asking about you.’

Cam glanced up.

‘He’s most insistent on seeing you again’ Andrew went on. ‘His name is Vergil. You know him?’

‘Vergil’s been asking about me?’ Cam mumbled to himself. ‘Yes’ he spoke loudly. ‘He.....I met him a few days ago. He came here, and um...we walked through the garden, to the fish pond.’

‘Did anything happen?’ Andrew spoke slowly, an eyebrow raised.

Cam leant forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

‘My powers came out’ he said quickly. ‘The pond frosted over...and...everything grew cold...’

Andrew watched him expectantly for several moments.

‘You brought it under control then?’ he asked. ‘Your magic.’

‘Yeah’ Cam mumbled. ‘Vergil told me to be calm, and so I tried...and I think it worked. It seems to happen when I get too emotional.....that’s what he said anyway.’

Andrew nodded silently.

‘I think you should go see him.’

‘What?’

‘Vergil’ Andrew said. ‘He seems to have taken a special interest in you, and he seems to know how to help you control your magic. I think you should go and see him. It’ll be good for you.’

‘Yeah’ Cam spoke meekly. ‘Sure...if you say so.’

‘He’s downstairs waiting for you now.’

‘Now?’ Cam raised his head.

‘Yes’ Andrew said. ‘Eat your food quickly and go and see him.’

Cam hesitated. ‘Now?’ he asked again.

‘Yes’ Andrew smiled wearily. ‘He said he’s happy to wait for you, but it’s not polite to keep people waiting for too long.’

‘No’ Cam whispered, staring at the food Andrew had brought him. ‘Of course not.’

‘I love this garden’ Vergil sighed happily, leaning forwards against the wall and smiling at the large vegetable patch before them. ‘It’s so lovely’ he beamed. ‘Rabbit!’ he cried suddenly, seeing one sitting at the edge of the vegetable patch. ‘Shoo!’ he cried waving his arms madly. ‘These vegetables are not for you!’ The rabbit startled, bolted quickly away, disappearing back into the woods that grew around them. ‘There’ Vergil sighed happily again, resting forwards on the wall and relaxing. ‘That’s better.’

Cam cast him a strange look, standing a step back from him and the wall.

‘Do you like this garden?’ Vergil asked him nonchalantly.

‘Why are you so interested in me?’

‘Hm?’ Vergil turned to face him. ‘What do you mean? It’s because you’re the first one I met coming here. Aren’t you interested in *me*?’

‘Hmmm’ Cam frowned, turning away.

‘Oh I see’ Vergil grinned slyly.

Cam glanced back at him nervously now.

‘You only care about Lucy don’t you?’

‘That’s not true!’ Cam protested.

Vergil only laughed at his reaction, which irritated Cam even more.

‘Is she your first love then?’

‘As a matter of fact’ Cam spoke slowly, bowing his head to the ground, ‘...she is. I met her a long time ago when we were both young.....I never thought I would see her again...especially not here...’

‘Hmm.’

Vergil glanced towards the manor.

‘She’s in there you know’ he said to Cam. ‘I saw her earlier today. She was sitting in the lounge reading.’

‘She was reading?’ Cam asked, perking up suddenly. ‘I’ve seen her read a lot. I think she likes to read...’

Vergil shrugged his shoulders, then sighed dreamily, his eyes glazing over. ‘My first love...was a beautiful woman. A true angel she was, with long white hair and the most adorable smile.’

‘What happened?’ Cam dared ask.

‘She died’ Vergil replied forlorn. ‘A very long time ago...but we were happy...for the longest time...’

Cam dipped his head, disappointed.

‘I don’t know anything about women’ Cam told him sadly. ‘I just want her to be happy, but don’t know what true love really is...all I know is pain.....’

‘Would you like to?’ Vergil said straightening up and moving to stand before him. ‘Learn how to love I mean?’

Cam hesitated, hunching his shoulders shyly.

‘Well....yes...’

Vergil leant forward suddenly, grasping Cam either side of his face and kissing him.

Cam froze wide-eyed in shock as he felt Vergil’s lips upon his.

Vergil leant back, staring into his eyes. He turned away suddenly, moving deliberately towards the manor. Cam watched him closely.

Vergil paused, glancing back at Cam with his hand upon the wooden gate.

Cam followed him inside, moving through the rooms and to a bedroom across the hall, Vergil’s bedroom. Vergil paused with his hand on the doorframe, glancing back at Cam.

Without breaking eye contact, Cam watched him go.

Vergil glanced down, slipping into the bedroom and waiting for him in the dark.

Cam moved closer, tentative now. He stopped in the doorway, hovering between the dark room before him and the light corridor behind.

‘You don’t have to come in’ Vergil told him looming in the dark, ‘if you don’t want to.’

Cam hesitated, taking in the surroundings within the room. It was lit only by the light from outside, which shone through a small window covered by a thin veil. The walls around the room bore heavy tapestries, and the four-poster bed in the middle looked soft.

Cam took a step into the room, closing the door gradually behind him. It felt as it had done before with Brioke, only different. This time *he* was the one closing the door. This time, *he* was the one making the choice.

He wanted this, he wanted to feel affection, to feel love.

The room became suddenly darker as Cam closed the door, and Vergil before him grinned seductively.

He moved closer to Cam.

'I've suffered in the past' Cam told him sincerely. 'I don't want it to feel the same way as it did before.'

'Don't worry' Vergil told him gently, brushing Cam's black hair back from his eyes. 'I won't do anything you don't want me to do.'

Cam leant back against the door as Vergil moved closer. Cam closed his eyes, lifting his head as Vergil ran his hand tenderly around his neck, kissing his skin gently. He began to unbutton Cam's shirt slowly, Vergil moved further down his body. Cam tensed suddenly, looking down as Vergil moved to his belt.

'It's ok' Vergil whispered back, kneeling before him. 'I won't hurt you. I promise.'

Cam let out a sigh, relaxing slightly as Vergil began to unbuckle his belt.

Cam craned his head back, closing his eyes and moaning in pleasure as Vergil put his mouth around him.

He felt so violated when Brioke had touched him, so dirty and used.

But with Vergil it felt different, it felt good, and he was gentle, caring.

Emotions began to stir within, and he began to feel things towards Vergil, things he never thought he would.

Vergil moved away before he was finished, rising and pulling Cam with him towards the bed. He shoved him back, Cam landed heavily on the sheets, staring up at Vergil who was smiling down at him.

Vergil began to unbutton his own shirt, before moving towards Cam.

'I've...' Cam began sitting up, 'I've never done it like this before....I've...'

'Shhh' Vergil whispered, placing a finger on his lips and pushing him gently back down.

'Don't worry' Vergil reassured him. 'I'll treat you nicely.'

He leaned over Cam, their naked flesh touching.

Vergil breathed in his ear. Cam gasped, tensing suddenly as Vergil's hand moved down his body and between his legs. Cam closed his eyes, throwing his head back and letting out a deep sigh.

Vergil whispered instructions into Cam's ear.

'Turn over' he said.

Cam tensed suddenly, staring uncertainly up at Vergil.

'It's ok' Vergil soothed, running his fingers through Cam's dark hair. 'You can trust me' he said, 'I promise I won't hurt you. Turn over' he said again, 'on your hands and knees.'

Cam sat up and obliged, staring down at the bed sheets as he waited for Vergil.

'Just relax' Vergil said to him, pushing his front down.

Cam lowered himself onto his elbows. He tensed as Vergil pushed himself forwards, moaning as Vergil leant over him.

Vergil paused then, allowing Cam's body to relax.

Cam let out a breath, his muscles easing slightly. Vergil pulled back slightly, then pushed forwards again.

'It's never felt this way before' Cam told him afterwards.

'In a good way?' Vergil asked lying by his side.

'Before it was always so.....violent.' His cheek twitched as he remembered those times.

'And this time?'

‘It felt....good.’

‘Good’ Vergil sighed, resting with his forearm over his eyes.

‘Vergil’ Cam asked him sitting up and looking back at him.

‘Hmm?’

‘Do you love me?’

Vergil moved his arm to get a better look at Cam.

‘I do’ Vergil told him. ‘I love you.’

‘I’ve never known love’ Cam. ‘Never.’

‘Well’ Vergil smiled, sitting up and pushing Cam back down, whispering into his ear. ‘Now you do.’

Cam smiled.

He was happy.

That night, they slept together, side by side in each other’s arms. Cam lay on his side, holding Vergil’s arm that was resting across his body. At first it had felt strange to have someone lay beside him, it felt strange to have someone hold him close. It felt strange, but it felt right. Even so, Cam’s sleep was an unsteady one. He frowned in his sleep, body twitching.

Vergil who held him drew his arm back slowly, woken by Cam, who began to groan as he continued to twitch, his body jerking more violently now.

Vergil propped himself up on an elbow, wide awake now and watching Cam closely.

Cam shifted this way and that, tossing his head. He gripped the sheets suddenly, moaning, before sitting bolt upright and screaming.

‘Cam!’ Vergil called to him alarmed, grabbing him and shaking him. ‘Cam it’s me!’

It took several seconds for Cam to calm down and realise where he was and that he was not in danger.

He let out a breath, shaking hands going to his head. He covered his eyes, turning away from Vergil as he fought back tears.

‘I’m sorry’ he whispered, shoulders beginning to tremble. ‘I’m sorry....’

The door to their bedroom opened suddenly and Lady the young healer stepped in, drawn to this room by the noise.

‘Oh’ she said caught off-guard at the sight of Vergil and Cam together in the same bed. ‘I’m sorry...I...just wanted to check everything was alright.’

Vergil smiled widely at her, speaking confidently.

‘Everything is fine. Thank you for your concern.’

She hesitated, glancing towards Cam who was still shaking.

‘S-sorry’ he fumbled. ‘I just had a nightmare.’

She lingered in the doorway for a moment, before stepping back and closing the door after her in silence.

Vergil turned to Cam when she was gone. ‘You suffer night terrors?’

‘Yeah’ Cam whispered, facing him in turn. ‘I’m sorry if I scared you.’

Vergil reached forwards to brush his hair back.

‘Your hair’s getting longer’ he told Cam distractedly.

His hand dropped and he suddenly embraced Cam firmly, resting his forehead against his.

'I'm sorry this happened to you' Vergil mumbled to him. 'I'm sorry you had to suffer this way.'

Cam said nothing. He bowed his head, holding Vergil back.

'It's nice' Cam whispered, '...to have someone by my side like this.'

'I'm glad you've accepted me' Vergil uttered. 'I just wish there was something I could do to make things better.'

Many days passed, and Cam was wandering listlessly about the manor. He leant forwards against the balustrade, staring down at the floor below him, where a few of the other residents were drifting about. One was eating, two were conversing, another reading.

'Cam. There you are.'

Cam straightened at the sound of the voice, unfolding his arms he turned to face James who stood behind him.

'We need to talk.'

'About what?' Cam asked uncertainly.

'Relax' James told him, 'everything is fine; we just want to talk with you.'

Cam narrowed his eyes suspiciously at that. 'We?'

James reached for him suddenly, Cam tensed at the gesture, drawing back slightly. James sighed, and placed his hand gently upon Cam's shoulder.

'Not everyone is going to hurt you' James said to him. 'We just need to talk about where we go from here' he told Cam. 'Come on' he said walking with him. 'Everything will be alright.' Cam walked with James away and to one of the small rooms within the manor, there were two other figures in the room alongside himself and James. One was the healer Andrew, and the other was a figure that Cam did not recognise. He glanced towards this man, who looked back at him with a dark expression.

'It's alright' James reassured Cam. 'Sean is one of your mother's soldiers. He is trustworthy.'

Cam averted his attention quickly.

'Why am I here?' Cam asked.

'We need to talk about your future' Andrew told him.

Cam's attention slid towards the healer.

'You need to return to the palace.'

'No' Cam said shaking his head and beginning to panic. 'No I won't!'

'You can't refuse' James told him in disbelief. 'You are our king. We've brought you a long way to keep you alive, to keep you safe. You must return to rule your kingdom.'

'After what they did to me?!'

'It is why you *must* return' James hastened.

'I can't...'

Sean stared at Cam in silence, before moving away.

'You are our king' James repeated. 'You must rule your kingdom, get rid of the evil that plagues it, and return it to the days your father ruled.'

'I can't...' Cam mumbled. 'I'm not strong enough.'

'Cam' James spoke quietly.

‘I’M NOT GOING BACK TO THE PALACE!’ Cam howled. ‘Not ever. I *hate* it there. I would rather *die* than go back!’

‘But what about your duties?’ James said quietly. ‘What about your brother?’

‘I don’t care for my duties’ Cam growled in anger, body quivering, ‘and as for my brother.....he doesn’t care about me.’

‘Cam’ James spoke sadly, ‘you know that isn’t true.’

‘It is’ Cam hissed. ‘It is true...’

The next day

Cam sat in the garden. For several hours now he had been reading a book. There were several rooms in the manor where he lived now, the manor that was now his home, that held many books. The shelves were filled with information and the most wonderful stories, and for a time Cam felt he had been transported to his past when he was young, in the days he lived a horrible life, reading the books in the palace were his only solace. Here he lived a seemingly safe life, in a place where people were kind and cared for him. But he lived in his mind an uncertain existence, still haunted by the past, still fearing for his brother, still fearing that he would be found by the wrong people, fearing for the future, fearing he would be returned to the palace and be forced to rule a kingdom he hated. And then there was Lucy.

Cam sighed miserably to himself.

Through all his fears and worry, he had at least one comfort. The books he read allowed his mind to travel to different worlds, and see the lives of other people, heroes who fought through the hardest of times, defeated their enemies, and rose as the victor in the end.

Cam closed his book, smiling to himself. The book he had finished had ended in such a way. The hero was weak at the start of the story, but through his experiences, he had grown stronger. He had fought and defeated his enemies, and at the end of the story, the people loved him.

My books Cam thought. *My stories...my one comfort...*

He raised his head then, glancing around across the gardens. His heart skipped a beat as he saw at a distance, a red headed figure. Lucy sat with her back to him, head down; she appeared to be reading a book of her own.

His heart skipped a beat again, as Vergil came around the corner, stepping out from behind a bush.

One comfort Cam grinned as Vergil approached. *And him.*

Vergil reached out to him as he walked past, brushing his fingers through Cam’s hair as he went by.

Cam turned his head around to face Vergil who circled around the bench, coming to stand behind him. Suddenly Vergil grabbed him around the shoulders and pushed him back, tipping him back onto the grassy floor beneath the bench on which he sat.

Cam fell back, dropping the book as Vergil leant over him.

‘Vergil’ Cam giggled trying to push him away. ‘Not here.’

‘Why not?’ Vergil beamed, leaning over him and kissing his neck over and over again.

‘Someone will see’ Cam replied, turning his head away.

‘I want them to see.’

Cam turned back to face him, and Vergil kissed him on the lips, moving his body over Cam’s, sitting on his waist as they kissed.

Vergil leant back, smiling warmly at Cam as he ran his fingers through his black hair again.

‘You’re so handsome’ Vergil told him. ‘You know that?’

‘I have been told’ Cam mumbled, looking up at Vergil who sat on top of him.

Vergil smiled again, giggling to himself as he ran his finger along Cam’s jaw playfully.

‘You’re happy here aren’t you?’ Vergil asked him.

‘I think so’ Cam answered back. ‘Except...I fear for the future.’

‘What do you want?’

‘I’m not exactly sure’ Cam admitted. ‘But...I know for sure at least, that I don’t want to go back to the palace, not ever...I hate it there.’

‘I know’ Vergil sighed. ‘I wouldn’t want to go back either if it was me.’

He leant forwards again, kissing him, and weaving his fingers through Cam’s, pinning him down with his weight.

‘I am happy here’ Cam said to him as Vergil leant back. ‘But I’m still scared that the others will force me to do something that I don’t want.’

‘Who?’ Vergil asked.

‘The people who saved me’ Cam said. ‘The people who brought me here, the healers...the soldiers.....I fear that they wish to control me.’

‘Cam...’ Vergil uttered.

Cam let out a sob then, bowing his head and pulling his hands out of Vergil’s hold.

‘Gods I’m so confused’ he stammered, grasping his head in anguish. ‘How can I be having these feelings for you....when I love Lucy...it’s not right.....none of this feels right....and yet...it does...’

‘Hey’ Vergil smiled at him, reaching forwards and lifting Cam’s chin up. ‘You love me don’t you?’

‘I...’ Cam began. ‘I don’t know...I mean....I think so.’

‘You have strong feeling for me?’

‘Yes.’

‘I have strong feelings for you too’ Vergil purred, leaning forwards and kissing him again.

Cam pushed him away then, turning over and rising to his feet.

‘No’ Cam said. ‘We shouldn’t....we shouldn’t be doing this. How can I feel this way about you *and* her? How can I feel this way about both?’

‘You just need time to sort your feelings’ Vergil told him, reaching towards him again.

‘No’ turned his head away as Vergil moved towards him.

‘Why not?’

‘We shouldn’t’ Cam replied, glancing towards him but not turning to face him. ‘Not here.’

‘No one’s going to see’ Vergil smiled, moving towards him again and pushing him deeper into the bushes.

‘Someone might see us’ Cam argued, trying to push him back.

‘No one’s going to see’ Vergil told him, speaking between kisses. ‘No one is going to hear...as long as you bite down.’

Cam flushed suddenly.

‘It’s alright’ Vergil whispered teasingly. ‘We’ve plenty of time.’

Cam allowed himself to be pushed back upon the picnic table behind him, staring up as Vergil leant over him.

‘You’re so handsome’ Vergil gleamed. He bowed his head, regarding Cam closely. ‘I’m going to take you now’ he said. ‘I can’t resist you.’

‘We shouldn’t’ Cam whispered back, lying on the table. ‘Not here.’

Vergil smiled, leaning over him and lowering himself so that their bodies touched.

‘But...’ he whispered into Cam’s ear. ‘You’re so delicious.’

Cam’s stomach flipped inside him, and he breathed slowly and deeply.

Vergil raised his body slightly, so that he could look into Cam’s face. He grinned down at him, before bending down and kissing him deeply. Cam did not resist, but lay there submissively as he felt Vergil inside him. He lifted his hands slowly as Vergil kissed him, moving his hands over Vergil’s body and under his shirt, feeling his chest, his back, his waist and muscles.

As Cam did this, Vergil moved his hand down Cam’s body and over his groin area, caressing him a while before unbuttoning his breeches and slipping his hand in. Cam broke away from their kiss, closing his eyes and leaning his head back as Vergil touched him.

‘I like it when you expose yourself to me’ Vergil told him, sneering down at him as he placed his mouth around his neck, biting his throat gently and moving down.

Cam moaned as Vergil’s bites became harder, running from his neck and down to his chest and belly, unbuttoning his shirt one by one as he went.

‘Such soft skin’ he said when he reached his midriff, ‘so tender and tasty...’

Cam gasped suddenly, opening his eyes as Vergil began to work. He moved his hand across the table, nails scratching the wood, his chest rising and falling.

After a time, Vergil leant back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

‘Turn over’ he mumbled.

Cam didn’t move, he only stared up at Vergil.

‘Turn over’ Vergil told him again.

Cam smirked at him, reaching up to grab him and pulling him down for a kiss.

After a few seconds Vergil pulled away, grabbing Cam roughly by the arm and turning him over onto his front. He began to pull Cam’s clothes away, leaning over him again.

‘Cam’ Vergil whispered, kissing his shoulder tenderly. ‘I love you.’

‘I love you too...Vergil.’

Vergil reached a hand towards him, brushing Cam’s cheek with the back of his hand, running his fingers through his black hair. His grip tightened suddenly, as he thrust into him. Cam balled his fists as Vergil ran his hands down his back and to his waist, savouring the moment and Vergil’s gentle rhythm.

Afterwards they stayed here for a short time, hidden from view within the thickly growing bushes. Cam sat upon the table with his feet resting on the low wall beside it. Vergil nearby sat on a chair, leaning with an elbow upon the table.

‘Is it always like this?’ Cam asked. ‘To love?’

‘Like what?’

‘Complicated.’

Vergil smirked. ‘It’s different for everyone’ he said.

‘You make me feel...’ Cam began. ‘You make me feel....’

‘Feel what?’ Vergil asked.

‘Happy’ Cam finished. ‘Loved.....in a way I’ve never felt before.’

‘One day’ Vergil said, ‘you may feel the same about Lucy.’

The thought pricked at his heart.

‘I want her to notice me’ Cam said. ‘I want her to know I exist.’

‘She does.’

Cam turned around to face Vergil.

Vergil met his gaze. ‘Didn’t you tell me you used to know her?’

‘That was a long time ago’ Cam mumbled, ‘though I never thought I would see her again. It’s so strange to find her here.’

‘And isn’t it a coincidence?’ Vergil smiled. ‘To find her here I mean. Perhaps it’s fate that brought you both here,’ he gleamed, ‘and fate, that will draw you closer together.’

Cam furrowed his brow, biting his lip in thought.

‘Do you think so?’ he asked Vergil.

Vergil stood, walking over towards Cam and snaking his hand around the back of Cam’s neck. Cam glanced up; Vergil was smiling down at him kindly.

Vergil leant forward and kissed him one last time, eyes glinting, before straightening and moving away.

He walked out of the bushes, leaving Cam alone with his thoughts.

Chapter Twenty One

More days passed, and Cam continued to watch Lucy from a distance. But he never spoke to her again. Too afraid of stuttering in front of her, too afraid of what she might think, and so, he spent his days alone, or with Vergil, growing ever more frustrated each time he was told to return to the palace and take up his duties.

It all became too much for him, and one day, completely unintentionally, he set the garden alight.

When the fires were put out, he thanked the gods that no one was hurt, praying almost none stop after it was over, and begging for forgiveness.

Andrew, James and Sean went away to talk, doing so without Cam. For which he was extremely grateful. And then, Cam heard some news.

‘You're leaving?’

‘Yes’ Vergil replied. ‘There is something I have to do...I've stayed here for too long as it is.’

‘How could you leave me like this?! How could you?’

Cam turned his back on Vergil angrily.

‘Are you crying?’ Vergil asked him, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

‘If I'm crying it's because of you’ Cam answered harshly back, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands. ‘How could you...how could you leave me like this?’

Vergil put a hand on the wall suddenly, trapping Cam. Cam stopped crying abruptly, glancing around at Vergil, who stared back at him intently.

‘Don't touch me’ Cam hissed.

Vergil ignored him, instead leaning forward.

Cam was about to speak sharply to him, when Vergil stopped him suddenly with a kiss, his other hand caressing his face.

‘No’ Cam pulled away, but Vergil pulled him back, holding his head roughly with both hands now.

Vergil pressed his body close to Cam's, pressing his hip against his.

‘No’ Cam said again, jerking away, he tripped and fell back, Vergil was atop him in an instant, holding him down, pinning him to the ground and holding each of his wrists, as he kissed him deeply. ‘I hate you...’ Cam whispered, tears in his eyes as Vergil moved his lips over Cam's throat and down to his chest. ‘I hate you.....’

‘You don't mean that’ Vergil said boldly as he began to unbutton Cam's shirt.

They were in the corridors of the manor now, and it was deserted. It was a beautiful day outside, and everyone was enjoying the sun.

Cam reached up with his free hand, grabbing Vergil by the throat and squeezing. Vergil froze, staring down at Cam. He didn't resist as Cam's arm began to shake holding him, gritting his teeth in anger with tears in his eyes. Vergil stared coolly back.

Eventually his grip weakened, and his hand fell back down, going to his face now as he began to sob.

‘Come on’ Vergil said, pulling him into a sitting position and lifting him on his shoulder. ‘I'll give you one last gift before I go.’

‘Put me down’ Cam growled at him as he was carried down the corridor towards Vergil's bedroom. ‘Put me *down*!’

‘Oh I will.’

Vergil marched into the room, throwing Cam roughly onto the bed. Cam rose instantly, making his way towards the door Vergil had turned towards, but Vergil was quicker. He slammed the door and locked it, turning swiftly back to Cam, hand on his chest and pushing him back towards the bed. Cam fell on the sheets again, staring up at Vergil standing over him.

‘I know this is difficult for you’ Vergil was saying as he unbuttoned his shirt. ‘It's not easy for me either, but I cannot stay here any longer. I only stayed as long as I have...for you...’

Cam glared at him as Vergil threw off his shirt, propped up on his elbows.

‘Come now’ Vergil said, crawling on the bed towards him. ‘Let's not argue.’

Cam lay back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling silently, just waiting for Vergil.

‘Let us savour this moment’ Vergil whispered, kissing his chest and moving further down his body.

Cam stayed still as Vergil began to unbuckle his belt; he stopped him before he could get too far, sitting up quickly and rolling himself on top of Vergil.

‘Oh?’ Vergil said teasingly. ‘This is a nice surprise.’

Cam hesitated, staring down at him, uncertain for a moment what to do.

‘Do you need some help?’ Vergil teased.

Cam moved slowly, placing his hand over Vergil’s mouth.

‘Keep quiet’ Cam told him, removing his hand after a few seconds when Vergil did not resist.

Cam ran his thumb over Vergil’s lower lip, before leaning over him and kissing him.

Vergil kissed him back. He sat up then, hand on Cam’s shoulder, pushing him over and rolling on top of him. Cam giggled, sitting up and pushing Vergil back, rolling back on top of him again. Cam’s heart beat began to quicken as he straddled Vergil, and he felt suddenly out of breath.

‘Cam’ Vergil whispered. ‘I want you to take me.’

Cam’s breath caught in his throat as he gazed down at Vergil. Vergil smiled, reaching up and brushing Cam’s hair back. ‘You’re so beautiful.’

‘So you keep saying.’

Cam caught his hand before it dropped, nuzzling into it.

‘I love you Vergil. I always have.’

‘Then show me.’

Cam leant back, moving suddenly as he pulled Vergil over to lie on his front. Vergil began to laugh as Cam pulled him into a kneeling position, Vergil on all fours now.

Cam’s hand moved down his body, he leant over Vergil, whispering into his ear.

‘Relax.’

Vergil smiled as Cam pushed himself forwards, moaning in pleasure.

‘So why are you leaving?’ Cam asked him as they lay side by side on the bed afterwards. ‘I have to know.’

‘You want to know why?’

‘Yes.’

Vergil smirked. ‘Because of Lucy.’

Cam tensed at the sound of her name.

‘What?’

‘It’s her you truly love’ Vergil said to him. ‘I can see it in your eyes when you look at her.’

‘I’ve known her for a long time’ Cam admitted. ‘But I’m too afraid to speak to her now...because I stutter....when I get scared or nervous.’

‘Well that’ Vergil said slowly, ‘is something you’re going to have to learn to overcome on your own.’

Vergil sat up, leaning over Cam and kissing him swiftly before rising and beginning to dress.

‘Are you leaving right now?’ Cam asked him sitting up.

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t want you to go’ Cam told him miserably.

Vergil turned back to him, bending down and caressing his cheek, lifting Cam's chin up and kissing him again.

'I don't want you to go' Cam whispered to him again.

'Forget about me' Vergil said. 'I was never here.'

'I can't pretend you were never here.'

'Try' Vergil said to him, letting go of him and making his way to the door. 'Love Lucy.....she is all that matters...'

'I'll never see you again' Cam said raising his voice slightly as Vergil's hand touched the door.

Vergil hesitated, hand frozen on the door handle.

'It's better this way' Vergil spoke turning back to Cam. 'It's been good' he said to him with a smile and sadness in his eyes. 'But now we must both move on.'

'I love you' Cam said to him. 'I always will.'

Vergil smiled kindly back at him, the edges of his eyes crinkled in both joy and sadness, before speaking his final words to him.

'I know do you. I love you too Cam....I shall never forget you.'

Vergil closed the door after him, pulling from his coat as he went a crow's mask and placing it on his face, before casting his hand out and opening a doorway of light. He stepped through the portal, and vanished.

Back in the room, Cam lay quietly on the bed, feeling a deep sense of loss and regret within him.

Chapter Twenty Two

'Great news gentleman!' Castello cried, marching into the council chambers to address the right and left hands of the king (or what was left of them, originally there were forty in number, now there were just eleven).

The palace had been quiet since Cam's plight, and no one had spoken of him since that day. Until today.

'I now know where Cameron is' Castello said jovially.

Desmond regarded him with a fixed expression. The other council members watched him silently until one of them spoke.

‘How do you know this?’ Valeri questioned.

‘I have my sources’ Castello replied seriously to him. ‘I know more than any of you do.’

Heremon turned away, groaning into his hand.

‘So where is he then?’ Storin asked.

‘The place has no name’ Castello told them, producing a map of the kingdom and placing it in the centre of the table so that the other council members could see. ‘But I know where it is’ he continued, bringing forth a pen. ‘Here’ he said, putting his mark on the map. ‘It’s a secluded place in the forest...far from here. Our soldiers could find it easily enough though.’

The other council members regarded with scrutiny the little X Castello had drawn.

‘There?’ Agnus questioned. ‘But there’s nothing there. It’s just an area of forest.’

‘Precisely’ Castello gleamed. ‘Isn’t that what someone who’s trying to hide would want you to think? It’s the perfect place, where no one would think to look...’

Castello grinned down at the map, seemingly very pleased with himself.

‘There is a manor there’ he explained, ‘a manor built within the woods, and it is filled with people that *we* would consider to be traitors...and Cam...’ He paused then with a sly grin, ‘*he* is there too.’

The other council members all exchanged glances with one another. Castello seemed so sure of himself, the others too were convinced.

‘Alright’ Denzil voiced. ‘Let’s send our soldiers to this place, and bring back the king.’

Less than an hour later that very same day, a band of soldiers rode from the palace, heading towards the mark on the map.

They rode swiftly, and without rest.

That night Cam had a nightmare. He dreamed of dark hands reaching out to grab him, and then he felt a great pain, in both his body and his mind.

When he woke, he saw the room around him was covered in frost, and his breath was a mist in the air before his mouth.

Cam stared about him in wonder at the room. It was cold, but...sort of beautiful in its icy glaze.

He pushed back the chilled sheets which crackled as he did, before getting up and moving across the room, heading downstairs for something to eat, though it was late.

When Cam returned to his room sometime later, he was surprised to see a woman there waiting for him.

The chill was gone, and he found her lying on his bed, eyeing him with almost a predatory gaze.

She turned towards him as he entered the room, lying back on his bed and dressed in a low cut, loosely fitted dress. Her shoulders bare, her arms bare, and her beautiful hair tied up.

‘He didn’t tell me’ she began, ‘that you would be so handsome.’

The door swung slowly shut behind Cam as he stared at her in shock.

The woman swung her legs over the edge of the bed, rising slowly and sauntering over to him.

‘W-what are you doing here?’ Cam asked tentatively.

‘I’m here for you’ she told him. ‘I’m here to pleasure you.’

Cam backed himself against the closed door, turning his head away from her as she began to kiss his neck.

She smiled in amusement at this, stepping back and considering him.

‘Yes’ she said. ‘He did say you would probably resist me.’

‘Who said that?’ Cam asked nervously, daring to look back at her.

‘Vergil’ the woman replied.

‘*Vergil* said that?’

‘I am a gift from him’ she said placing a hand over her heart and bowing to him. ‘My name is Malina.’

‘He...’ Cam began uncertainly, ‘gave you as a gift...?’

‘Yes’ Malina smiled straightening again. ‘I’m glad you understand. Although, the arrangement lasts only as long as I am needed.’

‘And what do I need you for?’

‘Pleasure’ she told him. ‘And practice.’

‘Practice?’

She reached for him, beginning to unbutton his shirt, speaking to him as she did so.

‘He tells me there is a woman you care deeply about, but you have never loved a woman before, have never been *physical* with a woman before, and that you don’t know how to please them, *pleasure* them.’

‘That does sound like something Vergil would say and do’ Cam began tentatively, ‘but I...don’t know if this is such a good idea.’

‘He’s already paid for me’ Malina said, slipping his shirt slowly off his shoulders and letting it fall to the floor. She stopped then, taking a step back as if giving him time to come to terms with the situation. ‘I think you would benefit from my services’ she said to him, eyes roving over his lean and handsome frame. ‘You want to make Lucy happy don’t you?’

‘Yes!’ Cam said eagerly. ‘I want that more than anything.’

‘I can teach you’ Malina said. ‘I can teach you how to love a woman, teach you about body language, how to act around women, what they are expecting to hear from you.’ She paused for a moment before continuing. ‘Women are harder to please sexually than men’ she told him. ‘I will teach you many things I’m sure you do not know.’

‘How?’ Cam asked desperately. ‘How do I make her love me?’

‘That’s your first mistake there’ she told him quickly. ‘You cannot *make* a woman love you. Love blooms if there is chemistry. A woman may grow to love a man in time, or she may never love him at all. The same goes for men towards women.’

‘And?’ Cam asked. ‘How do I make her happy?’

‘Little things’ Malina told him. ‘They are the things that truly matter. You must always be there for her, listen to her and remember what she says. And give her space, a man that is too forward is undesirable, if a woman wants you, she will let you know.’

‘More’ Cam hastened. ‘I want to know more.’

‘Tell her how you feel.’

‘About what?’

‘Anything. Everything. Communication is very important to a woman; she wants to know what you’re thinking. Remember, a good relationship is based on communication. Without communication there is no trust. Now what else?’ she paused in thought. ‘Tell her how much you love her, tell her she is beautiful, and above all...be a gentleman.’

Cam took a deep breath, calming his heart which began to beat painfully in his chest at the thought of Lucy.

‘How do I begin talking to her?’ Cam asked. ‘Where do I begin...what do I say?’

‘Find something you have in common with her’ Malina told him. ‘Begin there.’

‘I feel I am way in over my head’ he confessed, staring at the ground. ‘It almost seems too much for me to handle.’

‘Don’t worry’ Malina told him with a smile, ‘it might seem scary at first, but it will become easy enough. Just give it time. Now’ she said, moving closer, ‘I’m here, to teach you how to please a woman physically.’

Cam’s palms began to sweat, and his heart began to race.

‘Seduce me’ she told him.

He swallowed the lump in his throat.

‘Do you know how?’

‘No...I mean...I...I’ve never...I don’t.’

‘It’s alright’ Malina told him. ‘I know you’re nervous, it’s natural to be.’ She took his hand gently, leading him over to the bed. ‘If you want to love Lucy, you have to learn how to please her. With that I can help you.’

‘Alright’ Cam said, feeling a sudden sense of unreality at the strangeness of the situation, and how suddenly things had changed.

‘I will lead tonight’ she told him, ‘it will give us a chance to get to know each other.’

Cam allowed her to gently push him onto the bed, lying back as she moved over him.

‘Just try to relax’ she whispered. ‘If you feel you need me to stop, just say so.’

Cam stared up at the ceiling, heart pounding in his chest as she began to unbuckle his belt.

Days passed.

On one morning James came to Cam, telling him that he needed to learn to control his powers, or at least try his best to do so, referring back to the times his magic had caused harm, because Cam could not control his abilities.

Cam dipped his head, knowing what James said was fair.

‘But I don’t know how to stop it’ Cam mumbled back, feeling suddenly nervous and uncertain, and guilty at the damage he had already caused. ‘I don’t have any control over my powers, they just happen.’

‘Then perhaps you need help’ James said. ‘I will do what I can, whatever I can. Everyone here cares about you’ he told Cam. ‘We want you to be healthy and fit again, so that you can return to the throne one day.’

‘I don’t want such a thing’ Cam mumbled.

‘You must’ James told him wearily. ‘The lives of thousands of people are depending on you, the council who rule over this kingdom cause unspeakable harm and suffering to so many,

and only for their own benefit.’ He scowled then as he thought of them. ‘The old king, your father...was a good man. He would have wanted you to take up the throne.’

‘My father is dead’ Cam spoke flatly. ‘I don’t care what he wanted.’

James watched him sadly, before turning away.

‘You need to learn how to control your powers’ he said. ‘Meet me by the pools tomorrow morning.’

‘You know how to control them?’ Cam asked hopefully.

‘No’ James answered, ‘but I know what might help.’

Cam went to his room shortly after that, thinking about what James had said to him, and unable to get it out of his mind.

I want to learn to control my powers, or at least suppress them...

Cam sat upon his bed, leaning to the side with his elbow resting against the windowsill, staring outwards with eyes unfocused.

How much can James really do for me?

Early the next morning, Cam met James in a secluded area of land a short distance from the manor. It was a steep slope where a set of stairs had been cut out of the rock, leading to a secret garden below where a natural spring ran. Cam parted a wall of ivy before him, stepping through the archway, where he found James waiting for him. The man smiled to him.

‘This is Andrew’s secret garden’ James told him. ‘Very few people know about this.’

‘Why are you telling *me* about it then?’ Cam asked. ‘I had no idea this was here until now.’

James smiled again, sitting down upon one of the flat rocks. The water of the stream running gently by him within arm’s reach.

‘Come’ James said to him. ‘Sit with me.’

The muscles in Cam’s face twitched. He took a tentative step forward, and sat upon the rock beside James where he indicated.

Cam sat with his back straight and legs crossed. James turned to regard him.

‘I don’t know anything about your powers’ James began, ‘I didn’t even know magic existed until you showed me, but...’ he faced ahead again, ‘I can show you how to reach the deeper parts of your mind.’

‘Deeper parts?’ Cam echoed. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘You need to learn self-control’ James told him. ‘You need to learn to clear your mind, to simply *let* go of your troubles. You can cure yourself of many illnesses’ James smiled to him, tapping a finger to his temple; ‘...it’s all in the mind.’

‘But how?’ Cam lamented. ‘There is so much that troubles me...so much I fear.’

‘There is nothing here that can hurt you’ James told him sternly.

‘The only thing that is hurting you now...is yourself.’

Cam dipped his head ever so slightly.

‘Close your eyes’ James whispered to him. ‘I want you to be awake inside...without being aware of anything except awareness itself...just relax....and breath slowly.’

Cam let out a deep and heavy sigh, closing his eyes.

Everything was so still and peaceful around him, already he felt some of the tension leave his body.

‘Once you learn to control your own mind better’ James spoke to him, ‘perhaps you can learn to control your magic...’

Here they stayed for hours as the day wore on around them, and as the sky began to grow dark, James broke Cam from his trance.

‘Good Cam’ he said to him, ‘very good. How do you feel?’

Cam opened his eyes, blinking several times.

‘I feel...’ he breathed, ‘...at ease...’

‘You’ve done well today’ James said to him quietly. He smiled warmly then.

‘You should go back to the manor now.’

‘What about you?’

‘I stay here quite late’ James confessed. ‘I like to be alone with my thoughts. It takes me away from all the bad that I know of this world.’

Cam nodded once at this. ‘I understand.’

‘I will see you again in the morning’ James said to him. ‘Goodnight Cam’ he said turning away.

Cam lingered, watching him for a moment longer, before walking away, heading back up the steps and towards the manor.

When he reached his room, he found Malina there waiting for him.

He lay her back on the bed, moving his hand between her legs as she kissed him.

He pushed into her, moving constantly in a gentle rhythm, holding her close and caressing her.

When Cam had finished, he pulled away, kneeling before Malina as she sat up facing him.

A short time later, they began to talk.

‘When you kiss her for the first time’ she told him, ‘don’t make it a surprise; let her know its coming. Move close to her like this.’

Malina reached a hand slowly towards him, caressing his cheek tenderly, before leaning forwards, kissing him softly.

Cam felt her lips upon his, her gentle touch, her sweet aroma.

Malina leant back again smiling. She took Cam’s hand, placing it between her legs.

‘Show me’ she said to him. ‘Show me what you have learned.’

They lay on the bed together afterwards; Malina huddled against Cam, resting her head upon his chest. Anyone who might have seen them may have thought that the two were a couple.

But they shared no feelings for one other; everything between them was purely physical.

Cam lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling, holding Malina to him as she smiled.

‘I think...’ she spoke slowly, ‘...you are ready.’

The next morning, Cam met with James again in the hidden part of the garden. When he left several hours later, he felt freer, his mind clear.

On his way back to the manor, he found Malina, waiting for him in the garden.

The two began to talk, wandering slowly through the grounds. It wasn't long before they saw Lucy in the distance, sitting upon a bench with her back to them. It was a beautiful day, and she often spent many hours sitting in the sun reading, but today, she was sketching.

'I don't think she remembers me' Cam said to her Malina sadly as they watched Lucy.

'Well that's alright' Malina replied, looking across the gardens towards her, 'good even.'

'Good?' Cam turned to her. 'How can it be good?'

The two of them stood in the shadows of a grape vine, watching the red haired figure from a safe distance.

'You get a fresh start. A chance to make a first impression...all over again.'

'First impression?' Cam turned away from her sourly. 'I've already ruined that.'

'You've spoken to her?'

'Not really...sort of.....no.'

'You stuttered didn't you.'

It was phrased as a statement, not a question.

Cam clenched his fists, looking away and glaring at the floor angrily.

'That won't matter to her' Malina said, 'not if you show her who you really are.'

'Do you really think that's true?' Cam mumbled.

'Of course.'

'What if...what if...' Cam took a deep breath. 'What if she doesn't feel for me...what I feel for her?'

'You can't *make* someone love you' Malina said to him. 'What will be, will be. She will either love you,' she paused, 'or she will not. But...' she smiled slyly to him, 'you've told me that in the past she admitted feelings for you.'

'That was a long time ago.'

Malina looked away, standing with a hand upon her hip.

'There is only one way to know' she told Cam. 'Speak to her.'

'I'm afraid to.'

Malina looked back at him. 'If she is truly the one for you, then she will accept you the way you are.' She paused. 'You have to at least try. It's better to have tried and failed...than to give up before you've even begun.'

And with that, she walked away from him, without a backwards glance.

Cam watched her go reluctantly, wishing for a moment that she would stay, before looking away again and back towards Lucy.

Malina's last words echoed in his head.

He took a deep breath, trying in vain to calm his racing heart.

He walked forwards.

Lucy, who had been sketching on a small pad, glanced up at him as he approached.

In his heart Cam baulked, wishing in his mind to be somewhere else, anywhere else. He experienced a sudden pain in his chest, which he ignored, and his palms began to sweat.

No he said to himself, forcing himself to move onwards. *I have to do this. If I don't do it now, I never will.*

He stopped before Lucy, heart pounding in his throat. She stared up at him curiously, looking a bit confused. Cam swallowed the lump in his throat, scratching his itchy palms.

'H-hello.'

She straightened up, putting down her drawing pad and pencil.

‘Hello’ she replied.

Cam could hear the blood rushing in his ears.

‘I...my name is Cam.’

‘I’m Lucy.’

She stared at him, and Cam suddenly realised she was waiting for him to speak.

‘I like your drawing.’

‘Oh.’ Lucy glanced down at it. ‘It’s not very good. I don’t draw all that much, but...I was bored.’

‘Do you like flowers?’

‘Yes’ Lucy replied. ‘They are very beautiful. This garden...’ she looked about her, ‘it is very beautiful...’

Cam reached to the bush beside him, plucking a flower from its place and offering it to her.

‘Thank you’ Lucy said taking it. And then she smiled.

Cam’s heart skipped a beat.

She smiled! She actually smiled! Oh gods does that mean she’s happy? Did I do something right?

‘I should go’ he said hastily. ‘It was nice to see you...and thank you.’

He hurried off without another word, not giving her a chance to speak, not even looking back at her. He met Malina seconds later.

‘I made her smile’ Cam whispered hurriedly to her, feeling inside elated and happy.

‘Good’ Malina replied, sighing with relief. ‘I have taught you everything I can. Now it’s up to you.’

‘Thank you’ Cam said taking both her hands in his. ‘Thank you...for everything you’ve taught me.....you’ve really helped. I feel...’ he began to tremble then, not in fear, but in excitement, ‘...I feel I can really do this...’

Malina grinned widely at him. She took her hands from his grasp, cupping his face and kissing him one last time, before whispering in his ear.

‘Goodbye...’ she said. ‘Cameron...’

She turned and drifted away. Cam would never see her again.

He pressed his fingers lightly to his lips, still feeling her touch there, a sensation that had come to feel so natural to him.

Cam glanced behind him once, staring at the spot in the distance where Lucy sat, though now she was hidden from view.

He felt giddy, excited, and young again. He wanted to throw his hands in the air and cry out for joy.

Instead, he took a steady breath, forcing himself to calm, before walking away.

Give her time he thought. *That’s what Malina taught me...just give her time...*

That night, can suffered terrible dreams again.

Brioke reached forwards, running his fingers through Cam’s hair, he gripped him tightly suddenly, slamming Cam’s head into the mirror. Cam stumbled back, crying out in pain as the glass cut his eyes. Brioke grabbed him again, shoving him back and down the stairs nearby. Cam lost his footing and fell, hitting his head on the way down.

Cam jerked awake suddenly, body trembling and dripping with sweat.

He let out a sigh, pushing back the sheets and sitting up, hugging his knees to his chest, head buried in his arms.

He torments me even in death... Cam thought miserably. *Will this ever go away...?*

He left his bed early that morning, eating breakfast quickly and going outside into the gardens. It was where he spent most of his time nowadays. It was summer at this time, and the weather was fine almost every day. On this day, just like many before, the sky was clear, and the air even this early in the morning, was warm and comfortable.

Cam stared down at the open book on his lap before him, reading it quickly. He had found very early on in his life that he was a quick reader, reading and finishing several books a day some days. Back in the days when he was trapped in that palace all alone, with no one for company, back in the days when all he had were his books to distract him from his misery. He would spend hours in the libraries hiding from others, so engrossed was he. The books were filled with so many wonderful stories and adventures, and he grew to love them so very much. What wonderful things he had learnt in their pages.

The book he read now was a love story. A story between a powerful knight, and a lowly servant girl, the story was called Bertolt and Sookah. They lived in a time where class meant everything; and the knight and servant girl were worlds apart. Throughout the story they would meet time and again as certain events brought them together and closer to one another. The knight would be injured in a fight, and the servant girl would be there to heal him. The servant girl would get into trouble, and the knight would be there to protect her. Over time the knight learnt to overcome his arrogance and see past the end of his nose, as his feelings became clear to him. The servant girl in turn, overcame her stubbornness and finally admitted her feelings to him.

Cam was just reading the part when the knight was holding the servant girl in his arms, caressing her ever so tenderly. The wind in the meadow around them was strong, and the skirt of the dress the servant wore whipped around her ankles as she gazed up at him, with love and adoration in her eyes.

'Bertolt...' she uttered, 'I....I love....'

'Morning!'

Cam started suddenly, alarmed by the voice his eyes darted up and he saw Lucy standing there before him.

'Oh!' he hastened. 'I...I mean...morning.'

Oh gods it her...she's right in front of me! What do I do?!

He rose too quickly, hitting his head on the branch above him, hunched over in agony he clutched his head with both hands

Lucy giggled at his clumsy reaction, reaching down to pick up the book that had fallen from his lap as he stood.

'Here' she smiled, offering it to him.

Cam glanced at it, snatching it from her and turning away angrily.

'I'm sorry' she whispered, hand going to her mouth. *'I didn't mean to laugh...'*

Cam glanced back at her, only to see her still sniggering. He turned back to her, cheeks red, as Lucy calmed herself, straightening.

‘Bertolt and Sookah’ Lucy said reading the cover of the book. ‘I like that story.’

‘You do?’ he asked her tentatively, trying hard to forget his clumsiness and to take her mind off it too.

‘Yes’ she replied. ‘I...I’ve more time now to read the books I love, more time than I did before...before...’ she trailed off then, Cam tilted his head at her.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked her. ‘How did you get here?’

She turned away from him suddenly, bowing her head.

‘I’m sorry’ Cam said hastily, feeling suddenly unsure of himself. *Damit did I say something wrong?* ‘I didn’t mean to say anything bad.’

Lucy turned back to him, embracing him suddenly and crying into his shoulder.

‘My family were murdered’ she sobbed. ‘I just miss them so much...!’

Interlude start

Castello stood at the window, leaning forwards upon the sill and staring out at the world before him. There was no wind, not on this day, not on any day, not ever.

Castello scratched at the white stone with a nail, eyes distant and out of focus.

Here he remained for the longest time, until he suddenly noticed something. A shape in the distance, he had to strain his eyes to see, but he saw that it was a person, one of the eight. One of their own.

He couldn’t tell who it was at this distance. Perhaps half an hour or so passed before he straightened. He wasn’t sure how long exactly; time was not relevant in this world.

Castello left the building, moving slowly across its large white halls and outside to the bright world beyond.

He walked along the winding stone path that led away from the white building, the grass either side of him was tall and utterly still, every blade of grass the exact same length, the exact same width.

It took him several minutes to reach the figure, and when he did, he saw clearly now who it was.

‘Lucretia’ he said. ‘So it was you I saw through the window.’

She turned to face him, sitting up straight upon a rock. Around her were several more exactly the same.

‘Castello’ she said back to him in a monotone. ‘It’s you.’

He considered her for a moment, looking deep into her eyes.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’ve done so much’ she mumbled, speaking as if to herself and not looking at him. ‘I’ve done so much more than I ever thought possible, I’ve reached the top.....there is nowhere to go from here...nothing left to do...’

‘What are you saying?’ Castello asked her.

‘I want to die’ Lucretia said. ‘I’ve done everything I ever wanted, and more.....there is no reason for me to live anymore.’

He watched her in silence, saying nothing.

‘You’ve always been good to me’ Lucretia spoke up, looking him in the eye at last. ‘I never thanked you for that.’

Castello gave her a level expression.

‘Could you do it?’ Lucretia asked him. ‘I want it to be you.’

‘Why?’ he asked her. ‘Why do you want to die?’

Lucretia sighed wearily, looking suddenly very tired.

‘I thought there was more to life’ she told him. ‘I thought there was a meaning to life...that there was a god...that there was simply more out there.....but....’ She bowed her head. ‘I’ve found *nothing*.’

Castello did not move. He continued to watch her silently.

‘Please’ Lucretia said to him. ‘I want this.’

‘Only if you’re sure’ Castello replied at last.

‘Yes’ Lucretia whispered. ‘I am sure.’

Castello moved closer to her, placing his hand upon her head.

‘I shall never forget you’ he said to her, as she lifted her eyes up to him.

He summoned his magic to him, reaching into her mind and body.

Seconds later, her body went limp and she slumped forwards, Castello caught her before she fell, holding her in his arms.

‘Go now’ he whispered, ‘to the next place, to the afterlife.....if such a thing exists.’

Interlude end

‘I’ve loved you the very moment I first saw you!’ Cam blurted. He froze suddenly, staring in shock at the ground, realising what he had just said. ‘I-I mean...’ Cam hastened, pushing her away gently. ‘I mean...oh gods...it’s just....’ He half turned away. His hand went to his face, touching his forehead. ‘I remember meeting you for the first time when we were young’ he whispered. ‘I remember thinking how pretty you were, and then...years later...’ *I shouldn’t be saying this* he thought frantically to himself. *Shut up shut up.* ‘I saw you in the gardens...’ Cam continued, ‘you used to go there often. I used to watch you....you....you....’

‘You were that boy’ Lucy uttered, as the pieces fell into place. ‘That boy in the tower....’ Her expression dampened. ‘You always looked so sad...’

She remembers me! Cam thought with disbelief.

‘Cam...’ Lucy gasped suddenly, taking several steps back. ‘Your hair!’

Cam started then, hand going to his hair.

It was turning white.

No! Cam thought desperately. *Not now! Please!*

‘Stop’ he groaned angrily to himself, speaking through gritted teeth and grasping his head with both hands. ‘*Please stop!*’

Lucy drew a slow breath, watching as Cam slowly straightened, hands falling to his side. He turned and faced Lucy properly now.

His hair was pure white, his skin was glowing and his clothes had lightened and shone now until they too were almost pure white.

Cam stood there with his arms open, staring down at himself before looking up again at Lucy. Lucy’s hands had gone to her mouth. She lowered them, eyes wide in disbelief at what she was seeing.

‘You’re beautiful’ she breathed.

‘What...?’ Cam whispered uncertainly.

‘You’re like...’ Lucy whispered, ‘like...’ she drew a deep breath. ‘An angel...’

Cam blinked at her.

Lucy drew tentatively closer. Reaching out to take his hand in hers, lifting it and weaving her fingers through his.

She stared at him a moment longer, before stepping closer again, leaning into him until their bodies touched.

She embraced him slowly, arms wrapping around his body and holding him close, resting with her cheek against his shoulder.

Cam stared down at her in shock. The light began to fade, as the magic ebbed away, and his hair returned back to black.

He embraced her in turn, feeling warmth inside.

Cam was happy.

Chapter Twenty Three

A day passed, and Cam sat nervously in the garden, hugging the book to his chest, butterflies fluttering in his stomach.

His shoulders rose as he drew a slow breath.

He glanced at the sundial to his side, before looking around him, then back at the floor, then at the sundial again. He and Lucy had agreed to meet at this place at a certain time. He was worried for a moment that she would not appear, but when the moment came, Cam could not hold back the smile from his face.

‘Hey’ she said to him shyly, tucking a strand of her orange hair behind an ear.

‘Hey’ he said back to her, grasping the book tighter in his hands.

The last time they had met, Lucy had been called away by a healer. She met with this healer often, who had helped Lucy mend her psychological pain, and helped her cope with the trauma of seeing her family killed.

But Lucy would not be seeing this healer today. Today, she and Cam could spend their time alone together, all day.

‘What’s that book you’re reading?’ Lucy asked him.

‘Oh’ Cam said, looking down at it. He had brought it with him to help calm his nerves. He had not intended to read it, but just holding it helped soothe him. ‘It’s about angels and ghouls’ Cam answered.

‘Ghouls?’ Lucy repeated with a questioning look. ‘I don’t know what they are.’

‘They...’ Cam looked away, ‘...feed on human flesh. They need to...to survive. They look just like humans; they live amongst us...but are different.’

‘Are they real?’ Lucy asked him curiously.

‘No’ Cam smiled, putting the book down on the bench beside him. ‘They are just stories.’

Lucy sighed, gazing about them at the garden around.

‘I suppose this is my home now’ Lucy murmured, hugging herself and swaying from side to side. She looked back at him, considering him. ‘I thought that I would never see you again’ she said. ‘I thought that you had become nothing but a memory...that you would stay that way...’

‘I thought the same of you’ Cam answered quietly, looking up at her and meeting her gaze. ‘I never forgot you...but I thought I would never see you again after....’ He trailed off, and his eyes dropped to the ground.

‘What happened to you?’ Lucy asked him tentatively. ‘You were supposed to be king.’

Cam looked up at her again reluctantly.

‘Why?’ she uttered. ‘Why are you here when you should be at home in your palace, ruling your kingdom?’

Cam smiled sadly then, turning away and laughing humourlessly.

‘Oh Lucy...’ he sighed. ‘I don’t even know when it began to go wrong. Was it when I became king? When my father died? Or even way before that? I was just a child then...I didn’t know what was happening in the kingdom. I don’t even know what killed my father...whether or not it was natural...or if someone murdered him. I have no idea...even now.’

He looked back at her, meeting her gaze again.

‘They turned against me’ Cam breathed, ‘when they saw me use my magic. I ran from them, they ordered men to pursue me, to hunt me down...’

Cam remembered the horse falling from underneath him. He remembered jumping from the waterfall, swimming through the waters and climbing from the pool below back onto land.

He grasped his neck then, remembering being jerked back suddenly as the cloak he had worn caught on a rock as he tried to flee.

‘They hunted me down!’ Cam said, his voice breaking suddenly as his body began to tremble. ‘They hunted me down! Like a criminal...like an animal...’

His hand went to his forehead, covering his eyes as he shook.

No! You will not touch me again!’

‘I remember’ Cam whispered, ‘I remember everything now...as vividly as if it had just happened only a moment ago. ‘I remember my skin beginning to glow...being found by a gypsy traveller...Durril...and then there was the family that cared for me. Joe, Beatrice...their sons Henry and Wallace....and Elaina....’ Tears began to well in his eyes. ‘I loved her...I loved Valery...and...my brother...oh gods.....where is he now...where are they *all now?*’ he clamped his hand over his mouth, biting into his hand hard to try to control himself. ‘They tried to kill me...they found me and brought me back to the palace...they...*tortured* me...they tortured me.....the council condemned me to death...’

Lucy grasped his face then, forcing his chin upwards. She stared deep into his eyes, with tears in her own.

‘Forget about the pain of the past’ she whispered to him, her eyes wide and unblinking. ‘It’s over. We move forward now...together.’

Cam’s face contorted in pain and grief then, and Lucy leant forwards to embrace him. He held her back. Her skin felt so soft, her scent so pure. He noticed suddenly his own skin beginning to glow then, turning his head away and burying his face into Lucy’s shoulder he closed his eyes, holding her ever tighter, as his hair turned white.

‘Did you mean what you said?’

Cam glanced towards Lucy. Some time had passed; they had walked through the garden to another spot, Cam leaving his book behind. They sat now by a pool, watching the fish glide lazily through the water as the fountain at the back rained constantly gentle drops onto the surface of the pool.

‘Mean what?’ Cam asked her.

‘When you said that you loved me?’

Cam looked away.

‘Oh Cam’ she sighed unhappily. ‘You haven’t changed...not since that frightened little boy I first met all those years ago...you are still the same Cam.’

Cam looked back at her, and was shocked to see that she was crying silent tears.

‘My family...’ Lucy began reluctantly, ‘...well.....they’re gone.....there’s just me left.....’

Cam stared at her wide eyed as she spoke.

‘I thought...’ Lucy went on, ‘that I would have a normal life...that nothing much would ever change...or at least not this drastically....not like this...’

‘Yeah’ Cam mumbled, in a voice barely audible. ‘I knew I would never have a normal life.....but I never thought things would have turned out to be like this...surely father...’ he broke off suddenly, eyes glazing over.

The wind rustled the leaves and grasses around them, and there was a sudden chill in the air.

‘Do you think there’s an afterlife?’ Cam spoke suddenly out of the blue.

‘I don’t know’ Lucy answered quietly, ‘I mean...I hope so...’ She smiled sadly. ‘We will all find out in the end...’

From a distance, completely hidden by the cover of the trees and bushes, a group of soldiers watched him.

‘Why don’t we attack now?’ one asked. ‘He’s right there. We have him right where we want him.’

The leading man lowered his telescope, pushing it together between his hands and shrinking it in size.

‘No’ he said. ‘We have to watch him first. We must know what he is capable of before we attack. You saw the damage he caused at the palace.’

The other soldier looked ahead again, the others behind waited in silence. There were tens of them.

‘I wonder who the girl is?’ one of them said.

‘What’s going to happen in the future?’ Lucy asked him. ‘Will you go back to being king someday?’

Cam fell silent, pondering the thought for a moment.

‘No’ he said at last. ‘I never want to go back there. Not ever. More than anything I want to live a life as a normal person, not as a king...not as royalty. I want to.....I want to.....’ he narrowed his eyes in thought. ‘I want to be a normal man. I want to work on a farm...own a small house...have some horses...sheep, chickens...maybe a dog. I don’t want.....I don’t want to.....’

Lucy watched him silently.

‘I want to live with you’ Cam spoke suddenly, turning to her. ‘I’ve.....loved you...for a long time.....’ he looked away quickly, biting his tongue.

Lucy rose from where she sat; reaching out to him she took him by the hand, pulling him to his feet.

‘Perhaps we *can* share something special together’ she whispered to him.

She lifted her eyes up to his. She was so beautiful, so perfect. The way she moved, the way she talked, the way her hair curled, the shape of her lips.

Cam felt his stomach knot and his heart constrict. He let out a slow breath and moved closer to her. He lifted a hand, caressing her cheek tenderly.

She did not draw away, did not tense, but continued to stare into his eyes deeply.

Cam lifted his other hand, cupping her face.

She raised her head as Cam bowed his forehead to hers, leaning forward to kiss her.

Their lips touched. Cam closed his eyes as he felt her close to him, running his hands down her neck and grasping her shoulders lightly, prolonging the moment.

They broke apart, Lucy drawing a deep breath. And then she smiled.

She turned her back on him, skipping away. Cam was terrified for a moment he had done something wrong, but then she turned back to him, eyes trailing down his body before returning to his face. She smiled briefly at him, and then made off again. Cam realised she wanted him to follow her. And so he did.

Interlude start

In the control room in the other world, staring at the monitor, Vergil and Isami watched Cam and Lucy as they spoke, and saw them as they shared their first kiss. They watched in complete silence, neither moving, neither speaking. They did not react, only watched.

Interlude end

Lucy and Cam spent the rest of that day together, returning to his room when it began to grow late.

‘Why don’t we have a drink?’ Cam suggested nervously, closing the door behind him and staring at her.

‘Alright’ she said a little flustered. ‘What have you got?’

Cam snuck quietly downstairs to the kitchen, grabbing several bottles of wine, a glass for each of them, and taking them back up to his room, back to Lucy, who waited for him.

They talked and laughed together, and when the drinks began to go to their heads, they drew a little closer.

‘You’re so beautiful’ Cam said for the hundredth time. ‘I’ve always thought so...even when I was young.’

Lucy giggled childishly back at him, cheeks red as she hiccupped.

‘No’ she said to him. ‘*You’re* pretty.’

He giggled back at her.

They sat for a time on the floor with their drinks beside them, talking.

‘Why do people say...’ Cam mumbled, ‘that we only have five senses? Sight, touch, feel, smell, hearing, taste. What about the ability to know if you’re upside down? What do you call that?’

Lucy cocked her head, her orange hair falling over her face.

‘I don’t know’ she spoke slowly.

‘And what about the elements? Why do people say that there are only four elements? Fire, earth, wind and water. What about light and dark? Are those not elements?’

Lucy took another slow sip from her glass.

‘I think the elements light and dark have been ostracised’ Cam grumbled. ‘It’s really not fair.’

‘Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a whale?’ Lucy spoke up.

Cam lowered his glass, gazing blearily into the room.

‘...No....’

‘I wonder where they go when we don’t see them. I’ve heard stories of the ocean being so deep...that there are places the sun’s light can’t even reach...’

‘Woah...’ Cam mumbled. ‘That’s pretty deep.’

‘Do you think that’s where they go’ Lucy asked him, ‘all the whales?’

‘Maybe.’

‘What about the dolphins? Do you think they go down there too?’

‘Maybe it’s nice down there’ Cam thought aloud.

‘Do you think there are underwater cities down there, where it’s so deep...there is no light?’

‘Now that’s a thought...’ Cam murmured.

‘What if...what if.....there are mermaids down there?’

Cam glanced sideways at Lucy, sighing at her dreamily.

‘You would make the most gorgeous mermaid’ he said to her.

‘Do you really think so?’

‘Definitely’ Cam agreed, speaking with surety. ‘You would have a really long tail...with a huge tail, and scales that are yellow like the sun...and blue...they would glisten like jewels.’

‘Oh’ Lucy sighed. ‘I sound to pretty....’

‘I never said goodbye to my father’ Cam spoke suddenly forlorn.

‘No’ Lucy moaned. ‘Me neither.’

Cam looked at her. ‘We should have sex.’

‘What?’ Lucy asked. ‘Right here.....right now?’

‘Shhh’ Cam put his finger to his lips. ‘I won’t tell anyone.’

‘I’ve liked you for a long time’ Lucy told him. ‘You’re so handsome. You were like a ghost to me, like a legend...so mysterious and strange...like a mythical creature.’

‘It’s ok’ Cam said rising wobbly to his feet. ‘I know what I’m doing....we should stand up for this...’

‘Ok’ Lucy whispered, pushing herself into a stand also.

Cam tripped then, falling forwards and into Lucy. Together the both of them fell back onto the bed, rolling to the side off the edge and falling back to the floor with Lucy on top of Cam, who was cackling hysterically.

The next morning, Cam woke with a pounding headache.

‘Mmmmmmmmm.’

His body was aching all over where he had been sleeping on the hard wooden floor, and his muscles felt stiff.

He sat up, finding the thin blanket from the bed covering half his body, and looking down, he saw with shock that he was completely naked underneath.

He whipped around, hearing movement to his side, and stared wide eyed at Lucy as she sat up right next to him, her shoulders naked like his.

She clutched the blankets to her before they fell further down her chest, staring at him in equal surprise.

‘...Morning’ she managed.

‘Yeah’ Cam replied levelly. ‘M-morning.’

‘Listen’ Lucy began, ‘...did we...?’

‘I think we did.’

‘Hu.’

‘Yeah...’

Lucy glanced about her, looking for her clothes as Cam turned away, hand upon his aching head.

That the gods that’s over...

‘I need to get dressed’ Lucy spoke quietly.

‘Right’ Cam fumbled, hastily averting his eyes. He stared intently at the floor beside him, listening as Lucy rose to a stand, hearing her bare feet pad across the room.

She dressed quickly, speaking to Cam who still watched the floor.

‘I should go’ she said. ‘I...um...my head hurts...’

‘Yeah’ Cam said to her, finally looking her way. ‘Mine too.’

‘Right...ok um.....bye.’

Cam tensed suddenly, calling out to her before she left.

‘Wait!’

Lucy paused, glancing back at him in surprise. She lingered in the doorway, hand on the doorknob.

‘I...I had fun last night...and yesterday...at least...I-I think I did...I mean...I don’t really remember...’ he bit his tongue then, struggling to find his words. ‘What I’m trying to say is...I don’t regret anything...I’m glad we...’ he bowed his head. ‘I’m sorry’ he whispered.

‘It’s ok’ she smiled. It looked as if she were about to say more, but then she dipped her head.

‘I have to go’ she mumbled. ‘I’m sorry...’

Lucy left swiftly, closing the door after her with a snap. Cam stared after her, feeling worry in his heart.

Did I do everything right? Have I offended her? Oh gods...what if she thinks I’ve taken advantage of her?

Cam pushed his blankets away, finding his own clothes and getting dressed quickly.

I hope I didn’t do anything wrong...

Later that morning, Cam met with James at the secret spring where they would meditate together.

‘Are you alright Cam?’ James asked him the moment he appeared. ‘You look like hell.’

‘I um...drunk...some things...last night.’

‘You mean you got drunk?’

‘Yeah’ Cam answered reluctantly.

This was all that James said to him, but Cam got the impression he knew more than he let on.

‘Sit with me’ James smiled warmly.

Cam sat cross-legged on the rock beside him, the water in the stream trickled quietly nearby.

‘Have the meditations been helping?’ James asked him. ‘Are you able to control your powers a little better?’

‘I don’t know’ Cam replied shifting where he sat. ‘It’s hard to say...but...I feel a lot better.....I think...’

‘Did you hear that?’ the soldier whispered to his companion.

‘Yes’ the leading man said. ‘So he is unable to control his own magic...even now.’

They watched Cam and James a short distance away, completely concealed in the foliage and wild bushes that grew all around.

‘We have an advantage here’ the leading man continued in a hushed voice, frowning to himself, deep in thought.

‘When do we attack?’ the second man mumbled.

‘Tonight’ the other man replied, ‘when night falls and we have the cover of darkness.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘We will surround the place. He will be caught off guard...and will have nowhere to run.’

Later that evening, Cam went to one of the quiet rooms within the manor, to be alone and to read in silence. It was late, and the building was still. There was no one else about. Almost.

There came a knock at the door. Cam tensed suddenly, glancing over towards it.

He hesitated briefly before rising and making his way across the room, opening the door to find Lucy standing there.

‘I...’ she began tentatively, ‘I wanted to see you again.’

Cam stared at her in shock for several seconds, frozen, and then he forced himself to speak.

‘W-would you like to come in?’ he asked, heart leaping to his throat.

She smiled; stepping forwards as Cam moved back to give her space to enter.

He closed the door after her, palms suddenly sweating.

‘Why don’t we have a drink?’ Cam suggested nervously, unsure of what else to say.

‘No’ Lucy spoke, louder than perhaps she intended. She let out a slow breath, dipping her head slightly before speaking again. ‘I want to be myself when I experience this.’

Cam hesitated, staring into her eyes.

She did not break her gaze away from his, and so he moved closer, reading the signs.

He ran his hand along her jaw line; turning her head gently up to his as he leant down to kiss her.

Lucy’s hands moved up his body, and he walked forwards, pushing her gently back until her body pressed against the wall behind her.

Cam ran his hand beneath her chin as she tilted her head back; he trailed his kisses slowly down her neck, the way *she* had shown him. His hand slid around her waist and he pulled her to him sharply, Lucy grasping onto his forearms as his grip became more forceful.

‘Lucy’ he breathed into her shoulder. ‘I love you.’

‘Oh Cam’ she whispered back.

He pulled her away from the wall, turning and pushing her gently back onto the sofa.

Lucy lay on her back, staring up at Cam and breathing deeply as he leant over her. Cam gazed down at her, his breath slow and steady.

He leant back, straightening and unbuttoning his shirt. Lucy waiting simply watched as Cam slipped the shirt down his shoulders, leaning over Lucy again. He took Lucy by the hand, pressing her palm against his chest.

Lucy felt his heartbeat, the rhythmic pounding in his chest.

The firelight from the hearth nearby flickered in his eyes as his hand pressed against hers, holding her hand to his chest.

‘You’re so beautiful’ Lucy breathed, ‘so handsome...’

Cam still holding her by the hand pulled her up suddenly into a sitting position, his other hand slipped around her back, and he untied her dress from behind. The garment fell down her shoulders.

‘It’s alright’ he whispered to her gently. ‘We won’t be disturbed here.’

Lucy moved back along the sofa, allowing the dress to slip off her body as she went. Cam kissed her again, resting his body against hers and feeling her soft skin as his hand moved up her waist, caressing her chest as Lucy ran her fingers through his hair.

Her wandering hands moved along his skin and down his back until they reached his belt.

Her hand snaked around his waist as she reached for his buckle.

Cam leant back, gazing deeply into her eyes.

He straightened, unbuckling his belt.

He bore down on her again; trousers discarded lay on the floor. He kissed her, as he leant over her; his hand strayed down her body and between her legs.

Lucy drew a sharp intake of breath as he slipped his fingers in. Lucy moaned as he began to work.

After a time he kissed her again, moving his hand around the back of her knee and lifting her leg up.

She moaned again as he moved his pelvis. She wrapped her arms around the back of his neck as he thrust inside her. His breath quickened, his skin beaded with sweat in the warm room.

Was this was it was to truly love someone, to willingly give yourself to someone, and to have them love you and want you in return? He didn’t know. At least he thought he didn’t know, not until now.

It was Lucy. It was always Lucy.

‘You are the only woman I will ever love’ he told her, ‘for as long as I live.’

He faltered suddenly then, as he saw a tear run down her cheek.

‘Lucy?’ he started uncertainly, pausing. ‘What’s wrong? I’m not hurting you am I?’

‘No’ she whispered to him, taking his face in her hands.

‘Why are you crying?’

‘Because’ she said, smiling as she blinked slowly. ‘I’m so happy.’

She lowered her hands, running her fingers over his shoulders, down his arms and across his chest.

‘So muscular’ she said. She looked up at him again. ‘Don’t stop’ she told him. ‘Don’t stop...’
I love Lucy Cam thought as he continued his rhythm, *but even after all this time, I don’t think I will ever fully understand her.*

They slept peacefully that night, Cam and Lucy side by side. But something woke Cam early on. He was not sure at first what it was, but he was filled with a sudden uncertainty.

Cam sat up, staring around him in the dark.

All seemed peaceful; all seemed quiet, until the firelight flickered in his eyes.

Cam looked through the window, staring in horror out at the forest beyond.

The dark figures of men were moving around the garden with burning torches, setting fires all around the building.

‘Lucy! Get up!’

She jolted awake, sitting bolt upright.

‘What?’ she gasped, gazing all around then towards the window. ‘Oh gods...’

‘We have to go!’

They stumbled from the sofa, Cam sticking close to Lucy as they hastily dressed. He took her by the hand and pulled her from the room.

They stepped out into the corridor, glancing one way, then the other.

‘Where do we go?’ Lucy sobbed in fear.

Cam glanced wide eyed down one way, seeing a shadowy figure at the end of the corridor step out from around the corner. In his hand he held a long object. Cam did not spare the time to consider what it might be.

Without pause he ran in the opposite direction, dragging Lucy with him. A door opened to their side and another figure bolted towards them. Cam pulled Lucy to him, instinctively holding her tightly to him as she buried her face in his chest in fear. Cam’s magic lashed out wildly, destroying everything immediately around him, including the floor they stood on.

Cam and Lucy fell to the floor below, landing in a heap of splintered and smoking wood.

‘Lucy!’ he cried, crawling over the wreckage towards her.

He was grabbed from behind suddenly in a threatening hold, released almost the moment he was touched.

He did not know who had grabbed him, and didn’t want to think of the sudden warm damp sensation across his back, the feeling of freshly spilt blood. Whoever had grabbed him, they were dead now.

Cam crawled over to Lucy, cutting himself on the sharp wood as he went.

‘Lucy!’ he called to her.

The fires from outside burned brightly all around them, reaching into the building itself. Cam began to cough as the smoke thickened.

‘Cam!’

‘Lucy take my hand!’

People began to scream all around them as confusion and terror was sown, leaving their rooms and calling out for help from someone, anyone.

Lucy grabbed onto Cam’s hand and Cam pulled her close, holding onto her.

‘Cam don’t leave me!’

She screamed suddenly as she was pulled away from him by a figure. Cam cried in fear, reaching out for her.

He turned hearing movement behind him, glancing around just in time to see the soldier swing the club at him.

The pain he felt was only for a split second, and then he felt nothing.

Chapter Twenty Four

‘Cam!’

Cam felt himself being shaken awake.

‘Cam!’

That voice again Cam thought, furrowing his brow at the disturbance.

He was so tired, pain that had become as familiar to him as an old friend was throbbing at the back of his consciousness.

‘Cam!’

Cam opened his eyes suddenly, drawing a sharp breath as he jerked awake. It took him a few seconds for his sight to clear as he blinked rapidly, and he saw a red haired figure leaning over him.

He tilted his head as he lay there; squinting at the figure who gradually became clearer.

‘Lucy!’ he cried sitting up and embracing her.

‘Tie him down tight’ Lucy said. ‘Make sure he doesn’t move.’

‘I was so worried’ Cam sobbed, tears running down his cheeks. ‘I thought...I thought that you might have...oh gods...’ he held her tighter, breathing in her sweet scent. ‘I love you so much’ Cam whispered into her shoulder, feeling a tightening pressure around his wrists and ankles. ‘You’re the only person I’ve ever truly loved, one of the few people in my life who has ever treated me with kindness.’

‘Oh Cam’ Lucy smiled. ‘Cam...’

She was pulled back from him suddenly, Cam gasping in shock as he saw the soldier behind her, a soldier with Luke’s face, holding Lucy tightly in his grasp.

‘Cam!’ Lucy cried. ‘Help me!’

She gasped suddenly as the sword impaled her straight through her body from behind. Cam screamed in horror, reaching towards her as Lucy was thrown to the side, dead before she hit the floor.

‘Nooooooooo!’

Cam pawed at the ground in anguish, though was unable to reach her. His eyes darted back towards the soldier who was armoured, his face covered by a helmet.

The soldier moved towards Cam, but dropped his sword deliberately, before pushing Cam onto his back, pinning him to the ground as he held his arms, and bearing over him.

Cam drew a gasp, turning his head away but keeping his eyes fixed on the soldier on top of him.

‘.....Brioke....?’ He whispered tentatively, fear rising within him.

The figure leant back, sitting on Cam’s waist. Cam felt something tighten around his body again; it felt like...belts....

The figure sitting on top of him lifted his hand to his head, removing his helmet.

Cam gasped, seeing not Brioke's face, but Luke's again.

'Why didn't you tell me you were a monster?' Luke spoke.

'What?'

'Cam?' his brother said. 'Is that you?'

He hit Cam suddenly, striking him across the face.

Cam woke abruptly, opening his eyes and staring down at his own body. The first thing he noticed was that he sat in a chair. The second thing he noticed was that he was bound to it. Straps went around his wrists and ankles, and two around his torso. His heart instantly froze as the all too familiar situation became clear to him.

'Hello Cam' said the burly torturer, the same scarred one that had hurt him before. 'It's good to see you awake, and it's good to see you again, you surely haven't forgot me.'

Cam stared wide eyed at the man, going suddenly pale. He drew a shuddering breath, mouth open and beginning to sweat.

'Try anything funny' the torturer said, 'and I will make you regret it.'

'Are you going to hurt me?' Cam whispered in a shaking voice.

'No' the man said. 'I'm going to hurt *him*.'

Cam tensed suddenly, glancing behind him where he expected to see a wall, instead there was a curtain, behind which was a shadow.

'Cam?' his brother's voice came again. 'Is that you?'

'Luke?!'

'Oh thank the gods' came his brothers voice. 'Thank the gods...'

Cam watched as the torturer walked around him, and slipped behind the curtain. He heard the panic in his brother's voice.

'Get away from me!' Luke spat. 'No...don't....AAAAHHHHHHH!'

'Stop!' Cam cried. 'Why are you doing this?'

'You and your brother are no longer important' the torturer replied, 'which means we can have our fun with you.'

'No longer important?!' Cam's mind was frantic. 'Where do the others think my brother is?!' Cam demanded.

'They think he ran away' the torturer answered simply. 'Like you...'

Luke screamed again, as his nails were ripped out one by one.

'And besides' the torturer continued casually, 'we wouldn't want anyone associated with a freak like you be to in a position of power.'

'But my brother...' Cam whimpered, '...my brother is *innocent*.'

'No' the torturer continued from behind the curtain. His sentence was interrupted as Luke screamed again, the terrible sound ripping into Cam as tears ran down his cheeks. 'Your brother has caused us...the council, enough problems. He will die here, like you, and the both of you will be out of our lives forever...where you will cause no more problems.'

Luke screamed yet again, his voice a strangled cry of agony.

'Please!' Cam sobbed, though he knew his words were useless.

And then he saw a plague-masked figure.

Cam didn't know it, but the figure was smiling behind her mask.

‘Good morning’ she said, in her female voice.

The momentary silence was broken again by Luke’s voice from behind the curtain.

‘Do me a favour’ the masked figure said. ‘Don’t just sit there wallowing in your own misery. You can help yourself. If only you had the power.’

‘I can’t...’ Cam whispered. ‘I’m not strong enough.’

‘That’s what you’d like to think’ the masked figure spoke over Luke’s cries. ‘You have a power, a rare gift. It’s hard to face your fears, but it’s better than just giving up.’

Behind them, Luke screamed again.

‘You’ve no right to play the victim’ the masked figure told him. ‘You *chose* to be weak, this pain...it’s all your fault.’

‘No, I can’t hurt...’ Cam gasped. ‘I won’t use my powers for evil...I won’t be evil like those that have hurt me in the past.’

The masked figure leant forwards, close to Cam’s ear, brushing his skin. ‘You have the power to break this cycle of cruelty, it’s been going on for far too long. Your actions...your *willingness* to suffer, to not hurt other people; they only make you weak...not strong.’

‘Please just kill me!’ Cam cried out. ‘I CAN’T TAKE IT ANY MORE! Don’t keep me alive....just end it...I’m begging you.....I’ve suffered too much for *too long*...I don’t want to live anymore...every time I start to believe I am freed from it all...’ he glanced up, looking towards the masked figure with wide eyes, tears streaming down his cheeks. ‘...It always catches up to me...’ he finished in a whisper. ‘I will *never be free*...’

‘You know why your father died?’ the masked figure said ignoring his pleas. ‘He let himself become weak, let himself be destroyed by the council. *They* did this to him.’

‘What...?’

‘*They* killed him’ the masked figure snarled. ‘The council poisoned your father, over months, they made it look like he was sick, made it look like a natural death...but it wasn’t...he could have lived.....he could have been alive now...if only he’d been strong...if only he’d not have been so naive.’

Cam’s fear ebbed away, as anger began to rise inside him.

His hair turned slowly white.

‘*They* did this’ the masked figure said. ‘*They* did this. The council. They are the cause of all your pain. They are the root of it all. They poisoned and killed your father, they hunted you like a wild animal, they did this to you...and Brioke...remember *him*?’

‘What of Lucy?’ Cam uttered, his heart beating painfully in his chest. ‘...is she still alive?’

‘I don’t know’ the masked figure answered simply. ‘But you won’t find her trapped here like this.’

Cam remembered the dream of Lucy dying at the hands of his brother, his brother who had hurt him...like Brioke, his brother who had hurt him...by failing to protect him.

In Cam’s mind now...they were one in the same.

‘Luke’s part of the council’ Cam whispered calmly, still hearing his brother’s cries of agony.

Why didn’t you tell me you were a monster?

‘*They* did this to you’ the masked figure spoke to him. ‘*They* did this. Don’t wait for others to act for you. You have the power to change things now *yourself*.’

‘But my brother...’ Cam said, ‘how...*why*...?’

‘Not much of a brother is he?’ the figure said. ‘He let himself be put in this position. Not only did he fail to protect his you, he failed to protect even himself.’

Cam drew a slow and steady breath, eyes slowly widening.

‘Life is hard in this world’ the figure continued. ‘If you are weak, then you perish, and if you do not have the strength to stand for what is *right*, not matter how difficult it might be, then others will suffer with you, *because* of you.....because you failed to act

‘There’s too much wrong in this world...’ Cam breathed, ‘...too much hate....too much suffering...’

‘You could make it better.’

‘How...?’

‘There are *no others* in this world that have powers like yours’ the masked woman told him, ‘you are the first, and the only. Think of the king you might make, if only you were stronger....’

Cam slowly raises his head at this, his terror ebbing away, and turning into steady determination...and rage.

He no longer felt fear or uncertainty, but for the first time in his life, he felt surety.

‘You’re right’ he whispered to the wall. ‘I can make a difference in this world.’

There was a sudden strangled cry behind him. Blood splattered the curtain from the other side, and Luke’s cries were cut short.

There was a silence in which nothing happened, and then Luke spoke, staring in shock and disbelief at the torturer before him, who was lying dead in a pool of blood, his throat slit so deep it reached the bone.

‘C-Cam?’ Luke said in a shaky voice. ‘Cam. Are you there?’

On the other side of the curtain, Cam was unconscious. The effort of using the magic and the shock he had suffered had drained him, and now he was still, at peace, if not for a moment.

‘Cam!’ Luke cried. ‘Answer me!’

But Cam was gone.

Chapter Twenty Five

Cam slowly returned to consciousness, though there was nothing specific that seemed to have brought him around.

Everything around him was still, and there was not a sound to be heard.

Cam lifted his head slowly, feeling the straps around his body that bound him to the chair.

He was all alone. The masked figure was nowhere to be seen. There was no-one around him, or so he first thought.

Cam heard a small sound behind him. He half-turned his head around, towards the curtain behind him.

On the other side was Luke.

‘Cam?’ he whispered uncertainly. ‘Are...are you there?’

‘I’m here’ Cam replied in a dead tone.

‘Oh thank the gods!’ He began to laugh, a nervous and frightened laugh, as if he couldn’t believe what had just happened, as if he couldn’t believe he was still alive. ‘Did they hurt you?’ Luke asked in a shaky voice. ‘Are you alright?’

‘I’m fine’ Cam replied shortly.

‘I’m glad’ Luke sighed tearful. ‘I’m so glad...’

A sliver of anger coursed through Cam’s body suddenly.

‘Why?’ he spat. ‘Why are you glad?’

‘What?’ Luke fumbled. ‘Why would you ask me that? Cam? What’s wrong?’

‘You have forsaken me!’ Cam cried. ‘All my suffering...’ he snarled, ‘...all my pain...’ he finished quieter. ‘IT WAS YOUR FALT!’

‘No’ Luke answered desperately, his body beginning to tremble. ‘No that isn’t true!’

‘You left me to die’ Cam snarled back at him. ‘You stood and watched and did nothing while I was tied to a stake and *set on fire*! It was mother of all people who saved me, not you!’

‘Cam listen to me!’ Luke cried.

‘You didn’t come for me!’ Cam hollered, voice breaking. ‘I wanted to die, wanted to give up...but they wouldn’t let me! I was force-fed for weeks....*DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT’S LIKE!*? I suffered nightmares.....nightmares with you in them....you were.....hurting me....like....like....*Brioke*....’

Behind the curtain, Cam heard Luke whimper, his breath short and sharp, as he began to cry.

‘I’m sorry’ Luke whispered. ‘I know what he did to you.’

Cam’s anger only doubled.

‘*And you did NOTHING!* I kept Brioke to myself to protect *you*, only to get nothing in return...I was all alone....’

‘No’ Luke shot back. ‘No you’re wrong. I tried to protect you. I didn’t know all of your suffering, I didn’t know they force-fed you, I tried to help in what little way I could...but...when you became king you gave the council too much power...there was little I *could* do! I wanted to get close to you, but with you still being hunted....that would only have put you in danger....I tried to protect you....I tried...’

‘Well you *failed!*’ Cam screamed back, gritting his teeth as his hair began to glow white again.

The air began to hum around them, growing suddenly dense and stuffy.

Suddenly there was a crack in the air, lightning itself lit the very room in a flash as Cam’s skin began to glow ever brighter.

‘*I HATE YOU!*’ he screamed. ‘*I HATE YOU!*’

‘Cam please!’ Luke begged.

‘*I WISH YOU WERE DEAD!*’

‘Cam! Listen to yourself! You’re wrong!’

The curtain suddenly whipped open, controlled by the wind that Cam directed. Cam turned in his seat as far as he could, glaring at his brother.

Luke began to choke as a pressure tightened around his throat, watched by Cam snarling at his brother as he directed his magic.

Luke gasped for air, but no air would come to him.

‘*Please...*’ Luke managed to utter as the breath was forced out of him. ‘Cam-’

Tears ran down Luke’s cheeks as his head began to swim, close to losing consciousness.

Suddenly there came a sound of a door opening. Cam swung his head around as the door bounced back off the wall, his temporary distraction unconsciously causing him to release his magic. His hair went back to black. Luke instantly drew a deep gasp, coughing and retching violently.

The twins both saw as a figure ran into the room, each was equally surprised as to who it was. Their mother, the queen.

‘Oh gods’ she whispered at the sight of her sons, running first to Luke, body shaking at the sight of the blood on the floor, though she didn’t shake out of fear or uncertainty or weakness of any kind, but out of anger.

‘Those monsters will pay for this’ she swore as she untied Luke’s binds. ‘If it’s the last thing I ever do...I will make them pay...’

She worked quickly, freeing his wrists and ankles and the two belts around his torso, rising quickly to free Cam next. She faltered, seeing him already rising to his feet. Her eyes trailed down to the chair he had sat, seeing his binds had been slashed, as if by....

‘...magic?’ Miranda said. ‘Cam...’ she stared at him in shock. ‘How did you get here?’

He didn’t reply, only glared at her. He threw his hand out, and Miranda felt a force of air pushing her back away from her sons, towards the wall and out of the way. She fell against the wall, leaning back in support, and watched mutely in silent shock as events unfolded.

Luke rose from his seat, turning to face Cam.

The two stared at each other. For several seconds neither moved.

Then Luke took a step towards his brother.

‘Cam...’

He gasped in shock suddenly, as blood blossomed from his chest. Luke stared down at himself in disbelief. There was a deep gash; blood seeped from heavily from the wound.

Luke lifted his eyes again towards his brothers, who stood there passively, dangerously calm and detached.

A different person.

‘Brother...’ Luke uttered, stepping forward again.

He stumbled, as the next slash cut him deep in the shoulder.

Luke hunched his body over, holding himself, body tensed in pain. But he didn’t stop.

He straightened, face contorted in agony, but still he took a step forward.

The next cut came across his face, the one after that across his thigh, severing a vital artery, and the next across his stomach.

But still Luke moved forwards slowly.

Cam’s eye twitched in annoyance, like he was regarding Luke as nothing more than a pesky insect. Beside them, Miranda only watched in horror and disbelief.

Luke took yet another step forward.

Cam cut him again. Luke stumbled, moaning in agony, clutching this new wound. But he still moved forwards.

Cam drew away; taking a step back as Luke was now only inches away, moving closer still. Luke fell forwards, leaning into Cam. He lifted his arms slowly, and embraced Cam, even through all the pain.

‘This is all my fault’ Luke whispered faintly to him. ‘I knew you were suffering, but I didn’t know how to help you....I should have done something....I had the chance....in all that time....but I did nothing.’ He grimaced then, Cam felt Luke’s body tense quickly as he held him, before relaxing again. ‘I’m sorry Cam....’ Luke whimpered, ‘I’m so sorry....it’s my fault you suffered so, I should have been able to do something, I should have protected you.....can you ever forgive me...?’

‘Luke...’ Cam uttered, staring over his shoulder in shock.

‘I let....’ Luke began, ‘I let Brioke touch me...I....tried to gain his trust....to get close to him....so he would...drop his guard...’ he drew a deep shuddering breath, speaking in a whisper now. ‘I couldn’t bring myself to do it....even though he was evil...even though he deserved to die. I’m sorry Cam’ he said, tears running down his cheeks. ‘I was weak.....I just couldn’t...’

Cam stared down at him, wide eyed as he listened in silent shock.

‘Mother...’ Luke uttered, ‘mother killed him....she....she is strong....stronger....than I...’

Luke’s knees buckled and he collapsed, Cam crying out in alarm as he caught him.

‘Luke!’

Cam held him upright, Luke resting on his knees.

‘I’m sorry’ Cam sobbed, tears filling his eyes. ‘I should not have done this to you...Luke!’

Cam cried again as his brother slumped, he held him in his arms now.

Luke made a noise. He opened his eyes, blood streaming from his face. He smiled at his brother.

‘I’m just glad....to have....’ He grimaced again, closing his eyes tight before relaxing slightly, opening them again. ‘I’m glad to have you by.....my side again.....*my dear brother....*’

‘*Gods what have I done?*’ Cam breathed, beginning to panic now as he held his brother close to him. ‘It’s ok’ he said hastily to him, ‘I’ll save you, I’ll get you to a healers.’

‘He’s bleeding out’ Miranda spoke in a commanding voice from across the room as she straightened up, ‘be quick if you want to save him. He may only have minutes to live.’

Cam lifted his brother in his arms, calling all around him to the masked figures who were surely watching.

‘Please don’t let him die!’ he hollered to the room around him. ‘Please! I’ll do anything!’

There was no response, and so Cam carried his brother back up the stairs out of the dungeons and to the open brightly lit corridors beyond.

‘Help!’ Cam cried. ‘Please help him! I know you are watching. I will do anything for you to save him! *Anything!*’

Interlude start

‘Do you hear that?’ one of the masked figures said to the several around him as they stared at the monitor overhead. ‘Looks like he’s about to be indebted to us.’

Interlude end

‘Cam’ his mother spoke uncertainly, giving him a look as if she thought he had gone mad.

‘What are you...?’

Cam turned to her, holding Luke in his arms, Luke who was growing evermore pale from blood loss. Cam could feel his brother’s blood dampening his own clothes as he held him.

‘Oh gods...’ Cam shuddered through gritted teeth. ‘I can’t let him die....’

There was a sudden flash of light. Cam turned towards it, holding Luke close. He was not surprised at all to see the plague masked black cloaked figure with hood raised.

‘Please’ Cam whispered to the figure as it approached.

Behind this figure through the wall of light, followed several others just like the first.

‘We need a table’ the figure said.

‘In that room’ Miranda pointed, having composed herself somewhat at the strange sight of the figures, which had walked through a doorway of magic.

‘Quickly’ the figure said.

Cam hurried to the door his mother had pointed out, following her lead as she dashed ahead of him to hold the door open. He entered the room, seeing the table. Miranda swept her arms over the table, pushing everything on it to the floor. Papers and books slid, glasses smashed, but she didn’t care.

Cam laid his brother upon the table, stepping back as the hooded figures surrounded him.

‘Please save him’ Cam whispered. ‘Please save him...’ he begged.

‘We will do what we can’ one of the masked figures replied. ‘But you must leave this room.’

Cam stepped out, leaving the strange masked figures alone with Luke, praying even now for him to get better.

Please...I couldn’t live with myself knowing that I’d killed him...

The door to the room closed, and Cam and his mother stood side by side in the corridor, slightly out of breath.

‘So you came back then’ Miranda said breaking the silence.

Cam straightened, turning to face her.

‘I came back’ he spoke flatly to her, ‘but not by choice.’

‘I know my words are meaningless’ Miranda sighed unhappily, ‘but I’m sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen.’

‘I know’ Cam replied meekly, turning away.

He walked away from his mother then, leaving her behind.

‘You will have to excuse me’ he spoke back to her without pausing, ‘there is somewhere I want to be right now.’

‘Go then’ Miranda spoke quietly to the empty air, ‘do what you must...my son.’

Cam then went to a place he had not been to since he was a child, a place that he had almost forgotten, but was once very dear to him. His father’s grave.

Cam sat on the grass before the great stone slab that rested within the gardens.

He raised his head, gazing at the cold grave, its surface chilled now by the cool day.

Cam vaguely remembered the time, when he and his brother were just young children, shortly after their father had died, that they were found sleeping over the grave. Unable to sleep in their beds, and missing their father dearly, they had both come out here to visit the place he rested, sleeping on the hard stone despite the cold.

That time in which their mother had carried them back inside and given them a warm bath, was one of the few occasion in each of their lives where she had shown them any affection.

She had kissed them, and caressed them, and acted as a mother should, seeming to show genuine concern for their well being.

Cam rose to his feet, straightening; he walked slowly up to the grave, leaning over it.

He reached out to touch the stone, running his hand over the smooth surface.

‘Father. It has felt like many lifetimes since we last saw each other, and I wish you were here now.’ He let out a heavy breath, his eyes only half open as he stared down, blinking slowly.

‘Why? Why did you have to die? Why do things have to be the way they are? Why did I have to be born a prince? Why do I have to suffer so much?’

He felt tears pricking in his eyes then, and he blinked several times to keep them back.

Being here beside the bones of his father stirred old memories within him, and he remembered the fun he and his brother had once had with their father when they were children. His father had been a king, and yet behind closed doors, he had acted more like a jester.

Cam smiled weakly as he remembered the days their father used to read them bedtime stories, one night falling beside their bed and pushing himself under the bed itself, pretending the monster beneath was eating him. Another time he dressed as one of the guards, wearing full armour, sword and shield. He had given Cam and Luke their own helmets to wear, oversized as they were, and they had been pretending to be fighting a great battle, doing so around the dining table at breakfast, ignoring their mother who ate quietly with their head down, pretending they weren’t there.

‘We had some wonderful times together’ Cam whispered to the grave. ‘I only wish they had lasted a little longer...I wish you were here now, alive and well.....I wish this with all my heart. I wanted us to be just a normal family, that’s all I ever wanted.’

He sighed again, turning his back on the grave and leaning against it, folding his arms, head bowed.

He stayed this way for some time, until he heard approaching footsteps.

Cam opened his eyes, raising his head to the masked figure that approached.

He straightened up, unfolding his arms as the figure stopped before him.

‘How is he?’ Cam asked.

Reuben raised his hand, removing the mask from his face before answering.

‘Your brother is fine’ he said. ‘It will take a while for his injuries to heal. But he is alive and well, and will make a full recovery.’

Cam let out a heavy breath, relief flooding through him, as the fears and doubts that had been festering inside him all washed away.

‘Thank the gods’ he sighed.

Reuben turned away, glancing back at him before returning the mask to cover his face.

‘Follow me’ he said to Cam. ‘I will take you to him.’

Cam’s heart fluttered in his chest as he walked after Reuben, feeling a lump in his throat.

They walked in silence at a quickened pace, moving through the gardens towards the palace and swiftly up the many many stairs within, Cam resisting the urge to break the silence and ask about his brother.

Just stay calm he told himself over and over again. *He’s fine. He said he was fine; you’re going to see him now.*

It took them several minutes to reach the floor where Luke was, and by the time they reached the room, both Reuben and Cam were slightly out of breath.

Reuben stopped before the door, turning to Cam.

‘He’s here’ he told him.

Cam hesitated. This was a different room to the one that Cam had left his brother in.

Reuben smiled then. 'Go on' he told Cam. 'I'm sure he's anxious to see you.'

Reuben turned and walked away without another word.

Cam stared after him, until he rounded the corner out of sight.

He turned back to the door before him, taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, before reaching out, and opening it.

Cam stepped into the room, and saw Luke propped up in the bed by the far wall.

Cam closed the door behind him slowly, never taking his eyes from Luke, who smiled widely at the sight of him.

Cam approached slowly.

'Cam' Luke spoke quietly. '...you came.'

Cam reached the bed, standing over his brother, eyes travelling over his body briefly, seeing the bandages all over his body, before leaning forward and embracing him, lightly so as not to hurt him.

Luke held him back, grimacing slightly as he did so.

Cam straightened again.

'I'm...' Cam began, voice breaking. He stopped then, just smiling, before taking another breath and speaking again. 'I'm so glad you're alright' he told his brother. 'I thought that....' he stopped again.

'I can't believe you're here' Luke smiled up at him, '...after all this time. It's felt like so long...too long...' he paused then, before speaking again. 'Do you remember when we were young? We were inseparable.'

As Luke spoke, tears brimmed in his eyes; Cam in turn blinked several times to keep back his own.

'I remember' Cam whispered. 'I remember the good days.' He sighed then. 'I'm...' he said, his voice husky. 'I'm sorry I...' he turned his head away, trying to gather himself, before turning back. 'I'm sorry I hurt you' he said. 'I'm sorry I doubted you.'

'I never stopped thinking about you' Luke told him, eyes wide as he watched his brother. 'I thought about you...all the time. I felt sick everyday...Cam....I didn't know they had captured you the first time. I didn't know they brought you back to the palace. I didn't know. Cam. I swear I didn't know! I didn't know what they did to you. I didn't know you had been sentenced to be executed. I didn't know.' He took a deep breath. 'Mother did though, she saved you; can you believe it?' he laughed. 'I thought that she didn't care about either of us...but when...' Luke glanced down briefly, before meeting his gaze again. 'I told her' he said to Cam. 'I told our mother about what happened to you. About Brioke.....she killed him.'

'She...killed him?'

'Yes, as soon as I told her...she....' He ground his teeth then. 'I'm sorry' he whispered. 'I tried to solve the problem myself. I didn't know mother would help. I thought she didn't care. I tried to protect you. I swear that I tried.'

'I believe you' Cam whispered.

'I don't blame you for what you did before' Luke mumbled. 'I don't blame you for saying you hated me, for hurting me.....I can't even imagine what you went through, what you had

to endure for so long...and how it must have looked from your perspective.’ He shook his head then. ‘I understand if you thought that I didn’t care.’

Luke leant back, staring into his brother’s face.

A silence passed between them.

‘I suppose’ Luke began, breaking it; ‘you want to know the story from my point of view. I suppose I owe you that. You should know what happened. You should know that I always cared for you.’

‘No’ Cam shook his head. ‘You don’t need to tell me anything. I trust you completely.’

‘Cam’ Luke told him firmly. ‘You should know. I have to tell you.’

Chapter Twenty Six

‘The priest will be here?’ Cam uttered.

‘Yes’ Miranda replied, gliding past them. ‘He has reached these shores, and rides to the capital as we speak.....he will arrive sometime soon. Today in fact.’

Cam glanced towards Valery, who was watching him closely, eyes wide with expectation.

‘Today?’ Cam mumbled, feeling suddenly in shock.

‘And tomorrow’ Luke told him, leaning back against the desk with his arms folded, ‘you will be married as quickly as possible. Then perhaps something could be done about this dreadful council.’

Curse this dam council Luke thought, bowing his head and grimacing. *What will become of us?*

‘You should go’ he said to his brother. ‘Make whatever preparations you must.’

‘Right’ Cam replied awkwardly. ‘Right...’ he shifted on the spot. ‘Ok then um...let’s go Valery.’

The two of them left the room. Luke and Miranda were alone now.

‘Do you think he will make it?’ Luke asked her.

‘The priest or Cam?’

Luke glanced at his mother, uncrossing his arms and pushing himself off the wall.

‘Do you think we will ever gain the upper hand?’ he asked her.

‘None could know.’

‘Do you think we could ever get rid of the council, or at least control them like in the days when father was alive?’

‘None could know’ Miranda repeated again.

A flicker of irritation crossed Luke’s brow, and he turned to glare at his mother.

‘I think’ he spoke slowly, ‘I’m going to check on Cam.’

He left his mother alone in the room, stepping out into the corridor. He glanced one way, then the other, seeing in the distance Valery walking away, without Cam.

Luke felt his heart skip a beat, he scratched his palms nervously. He turned and walked the other way.

I've got a bad feeling about this Luke thought grimly to himself. *Please...let it not be so...*

His pace quickened as he marched, heading up and down several flights of stairs.

He heard a voice in the distance, muffled as it sounded through a closed door. But he heard the words spoken clearly.

'No! You will not touch me again!'

Luke broke into a run, heading to the level above.

When he reached the door he burst into the room without pause, calling out in horror.

'Brioke!'

He pulled him off Cam, who was curled up in a ball on the ground as Brioke beat him. The moment he was free, Cam gingerly began to rise to his feet, pushing himself off the ground.

Luke let go of Brioke, crying out in fear at the sight of Cam's eyes as they began to glow, a blinding white light.

Without a moment's hesitation, Cam lunged for Brioke, grabbing him by the shirt he began to attack.

Luke fought through the gale Cam's magic had created in the room, trying to reach him as the snow and sleet and fire and lightning thrashed all around them.

Luke suddenly grabbed his brother, shoving him back and away from Brioke.

'Leave him alone!' Luke hollered over the roar of the elements around them.

'YOU'RE PROTECTING HIM?!' Cam screamed as he backed away from him. 'AFTER EVERYTHING HE DID TO ME?!'

'You can't mend violence with violence!' Luke screamed back.

'I can!' Cam snarled. 'I can and I fucking will!'

Cam backed further away as he spoke, straightening suddenly.

The ground beneath them began to tremble, then without warning the floor cracked and crumbled, becoming nothing but dust.

Brioke and Luke backed against the wall to avoid falling, as Cam, descended into the floor below, utterly destroying the stone around him.

Cam destroyed floor after floor, descending he drew closer to the ground, leaving behind him carnage and chaos.

Luke stared down in utter disbelief and bewilderment at the damage his brother had caused.

'.....Cam?'

Cam had caused untold damage to the palace and its gardens, it took hours for men to put the fires out in the gardens, and when they did at last succeed, almost everything had been destroyed.

Men had been sent out to look for Cam, but he had been lost, and his trail had gone cold.

'This is all your doing' one of the council members had accused Luke.

'No. I had nothing to do with it...I didn't know!'

'You had better mind your step from now on' he had been warned, 'because we are watching you.'

Later that evening, Luke went to visit Brioke.

Luke stormed into his office without knocking; Brioke looked up sharply, alarm written over his face at the sudden interruption.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he demanded.

Luke didn’t answer, he simply leant back against the table, pushing Brioke’s notes to the floor and staring at him.

Brioke glared back silently, waiting to see what he would do.

‘I know you want me’ Luke said. ‘You can have me.....if you want.’

Brioke narrowed his eyes as if suspecting a trick.

‘Cam’s gone’ Luke pressed. ‘It’s just me now.’

Brioke placed his hands down flat upon the desk, rising slowly, never breaking eye contact, as Luke did the same.

He then walked around him, moving over to the door and slamming it shut, before rounding on Luke. Luke gasped as Brioke grabbed hold of him, turning him around and bending him over the desk.

I can do this Luke thought to himself, frightened, eyes wide in shock and horror at what was about to happen. *Cam endured this for years...I can do this...*

Brioke thrust into. Luke moaned, leaning further over the desk, head hung.

He intended to get close to Brioke, so that he could get the opportunity to kill him when his guard was down. But when the time came, Luke just couldn’t bring himself to do it, and so he went to visit his mother.

‘Mother’ Luke began. ‘There’s no easy way for me to tell you this, so I’m going to just come out and say it. Cam has been sexually abused by Brioke since he was seven years old.’

Several days later, Brioke was dead, and Luke watched from the doorway of the dining hall as the council, completely oblivious, feasted on the pigs that had eaten the chopped up pieces of Brioke’s body.

‘I can’t believe you did it’ he said flatly.

Miranda glanced at him from the side, hidden from view behind Luke.

She didn’t say anything, but simply smiled.

No one ever found out what had happened to Brioke. He had simply vanished, just like many of the other council members before him, and just like them, Brioke too was presumed dead.

And after a time, people stopped looking for him.

Sometime later, Luke found himself leaning on one of the balconies, staring out towards the horizon.

‘Cam...’ he spoke to the wind. ‘I hope you stay away.’

Luke had joined the council shortly after that, to act as an advisor to help look for his brother. But really, he had his own agenda. He sat with the council in the early days, and was advised by his mother in secret, and told things that no one else would tell him.

‘Just look around the council’ she had said. ‘It’s made up of very dangerous people. That one there’ she said glancing towards him as they lingered in the doorway of the council chamber

while the others spoke, 'he is a master of poison. That one there, an assassin' she indicated, 'the one opposite him, a General, who holds the support of all his soldiers.'

'And that one?' Luke asked pointing to another man.

'He's a teacher.'

'He doesn't sound so scary.'

Miranda smiled. 'Not at first. But his damage, though it takes longer, could be far more harmful. He is in charge of all the schools in the capital and beyond. He decides what the students learn, no matter what it might be. He could be brainwashing children under the king's nose and we wouldn't know.'

It was not long after that, that Cam was captured, and Luke was forced to watch him be sentenced to death.

'No' he hissed through gritted teeth, tears brimming in his eyes. 'How can this happen? This is wrong. It isn't supposed to be this way!'

He composed himself, and leant forwards over the wall of the balcony on which he stood.

Luke's heart clenched in his chest as his eyes met with Cam's, and he saw the terror in his brother then, the tears in his eyes at he was tied to the stake.

Miranda stood beside Luke to watch as the pyre was lit.

When Cam had been rescued from the fire, and his saviours escaped, Luke prayed that he was alive and well.

It wasn't long after that, that the council came for him, believing him to be responsible for Cam's escape.

They tortured him, and Miranda was made to listen to his screams as she stood at the top of the stairs to the dungeons.

She pushed herself off the wall calmly, turning and walking away.

'Cam' she sighed. 'I hope you make the most of this second chance you've been given.'

Luke spent weeks imprisoned in the dungeons, living most of his time in the dark, starving, and praying to the gods for Cam's safety.

But in the end, as was inevitable, Cam had been found.

Cam woke abruptly, opening his eyes and staring down at his own body. The first thing he noticed was that he sat in a chair. The second thing he noticed was that he was bound to it. Straps went around his wrists and ankles, and two around his torso. His heart instantly froze as the all too familiar situation became clear to him.

'Hello Cam' said the burly torturer, the same scarred one that had hurt him before. 'It's good to see you awake, and it's good to see you again, you surely haven't forgot me.'

Cam stared wide eyed at the man, going suddenly pale. He drew a shuddering breath, mouth open and beginning to sweat.

'Try anything funny' the torturer said, 'and I will make you regret it.'

'Are you going to hurt me?' Cam whispered in a shaking voice.

'No' the man said. 'I'm going to hurt *him*.'

Chapter Twenty Seven

‘I knew Brioke was behind it all’ Luke said angrily, balling his fists. ‘I knew it from the start. He was an evil man. I cannot believe...I just thought that...’ he bit back his words, forcing himself to relax. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, before opening them again, his expression this time gentle. ‘I’m glad he’s gone now’ he spoke calmly. ‘It’s what he deserved.’

Luke raised his head, looking at Cam then.

‘What happens now?’ he asked Cam in a distant voice. ‘There are members of the council still alive. They still rule the kingdom.’ He waited, before speaking again. ‘What happens now?’

‘I have to find Lucy’ Cam breathed.

‘Who?’

Cam let out a sigh, wondering how best to explain.

‘Do you remember’ he began, ‘many years ago when we snuck out of the palace to live in the streets, when we were part of the guild stealing from others?’

‘Yes’ Luke mumbled, ‘I remember something of the sort.’

‘You probably don’t remember her, you met her only once I think’ Cam said, ‘but there was a girl that we met. She wasn’t part of the thieves’ guild, but one of her brothers was familiar with the guild, and friends with them I think. She...Lucy’s family, saved me and took me in when I was in danger. Do you remember? When we were split up?’

‘I vaguely remember’ Luke whispered. ‘It was...so long ago...’ he sighed. ‘I completely forgot about it...until now...’

‘I stayed with their family for a short time’ Cam went on, ‘I think I did. Anyway...’ he continued. ‘Since that day I first met her, she’s appeared again throughout my life, for years, up until recently. We...’ he began. ‘We are lovers, were...I mean...’ he let out a sigh. ‘I don’t know what’s happened to her’ he admitted. ‘I don’t even know if she is still alive.... The place I was staying, somewhere far away...was found. The whole building was completely destroyed.....I don’t know if she made it...’ He bit his lip then, to stop himself from sobbing. ‘I don’t know’ he went on, ‘if she is dead or alive...’

‘She means a lot to you?’ Luke asked.

‘I love her’ Cam mumbled, eyes out of focus. ‘I...oh gods....I just pray that she is still alive and well...if she died.....’ Cam gritted his teeth, turning away from Luke and speaking in a mumble. ‘I’ve known her for so long...have loved her for so long. If anything ever happened to her...if she died...well.....I don’t think I would ever recover from it.’

Cam raised his head then, gazing past Luke and through the window, though he could see nothing, not through the warped glass.

‘She is out there somewhere’ Cam breathed, ‘...somewhere.....my Lucy.....’

Interlude start

‘Go!’ Vergil commanded. ‘We must find this woman. Search every corner of the map! Leave no stone unturned!’

The hooded and masked figures opened several portals, each leading to the same world. Cam’s world. There they would set out to search for Lucy. They would find her no matter what, whether she was dead or alive.

‘Do you know what you're doing?’ Vergil asked, speaking to their newest member, the one that had replaced Lucretia after she had died.

‘Yes’ Wonderland replied. She was a fairy, petite in build, her delicate glassy wings quivering behind her. ‘Don’t worry’ she gleamed slyly, moving towards her own portal and bowing her wings as she went. ‘I can move a lot faster than any of you.’

Interlude end

It was several hours later, when one of the masked figures appeared to Cam.

He was alone now, standing on a balcony and leaning forwards against the stone wall, gazing out onto the world. His brother he had left alone now to rest and recover, but he didn’t stray far from him.

Cam heard a noise, the sound of a flurry of air, a rustle of clothing.

He straightened calmly, and turned to see one of the masked figures standing there. The plague mask, the crows face, staring back at him blankly.

‘We’ve searched the wreckage of the manor’ the male voice said to him. ‘There is no sign of Lucy...no body.....it’s best to assume she got out alive.’

Cam let out a deep breath, relief swelling inside him.

‘She’s probably escaped somewhere’ the masked figure went on. ‘My people are looking for her now.’

‘What are the chances of finding her?’ Cam asked.

‘Pretty high. But...we haven’t found her yet. She has proven to be quite elusive.’

‘But she’s alright?’

‘Most likely’ the figure went on. ‘We will keep looking.’

Cam sighed, bowing his head and stepping back. ‘If anything happened to her...’

‘Don’t worry’ the masked figure told him. ‘We won’t let anything bad happen to her. She can’t hide from us for long. We will find her.’

‘And my brother?’ Cam asked nervously. ‘Will he be safe with the council here?’

‘You shouldn’t worry about him either’ the masked figure told him. ‘We will watch out for him now. We’ve taken far too much interest in both of you to lose you now.’

Cam nodded slowly, gritting his teeth before looking up again at the figure.

‘And what payment do you seek in return for what you have done for me?’

He dreaded to hear the answer, but he had to ask. It was inevitable.

‘We want you to travel to other worlds’ the masked figure told him casually, ‘and learn things that would help you master your powers. You need to learn to do more than just glow, which in itself is pretty useless, unless you’re in a dark room.’

Cam glanced at him again. Behind his mask the figure smiled.

‘You want me to be like you?’

‘Hm?’

‘You travel to different worlds’ Cam said to him. ‘Don’t you.’

‘What makes you think that?’ the masked figure asked. ‘This is the first time such a thing has been mentioned to you.’

‘I’m not stupid.’

The figure paused.

‘You remember Auntie don’t you?’ Cam said to him.

‘Yes’ the masked figure replied. ‘You were very close to her. Her death was as much a shock to us as it was to you.’

‘I doubt that’ Cam said flatly. ‘I remember the day she was...’

He fell silent for a moment.

‘One day’ Cam said, ‘she brought something to us to play with. She said it came from a tree house shop, but I’ve thought about it often in days gone by, even years later. But...I know now, there is nothing that exists in our world that was like that.’

‘What was it?’

Cam furrowed his brow

‘It was about this big’ Cam indicated. ‘And made of black rubber.’

‘A car tyre?’

‘I don’t know what that is.’

‘Of course you don’t’ the masked figure smirked, turning away.

‘It’s not just that’ Cam went on. ‘But the way that you always seemed to appear when was convenient. The way things turned out, the way things changed. But more importantly...the constant feeling I experienced of being watched. It might have been a stretch’ Cam said, ‘it might have been a strange thing to think, and unusual conclusion to come to. But to me it was obvious. You’ he said glancing to the masked figure, ‘could not possibly belong to this world.’

The figure smirked again behind his mask, grinning wider than before.

‘Brilliant deduction.’

‘Why did Auntie have to die?’ Cam spoke out of the blue. ‘Who killed her and why?’

The masked figure leant back against the balcony wall. ‘It doesn’t happen very often’ he said, ‘but occasionally, some of our members will try to kill other members, in order to create an opening. You see, there can only ever be eight of us.’ He paused. ‘A long time ago, one of our members fell in love with a being who lived in another world, and he wanted her to be part of our organisation. He killed the one you knew as Auntie, to create a space for her.’

‘But...’ Cam began. ‘Auntie loved him. I know she did. I saw them...together...’

‘Yes’ the masked figure replied casually. ‘She loved him. And he pretended to love her. But in reality, he loved another.’

‘What happened then?’ Cam asked. ‘Did the other woman become part of your organisation?’

‘No.’ the masked figure shook his head. ‘No she didn’t. Another member, someone who cared deeply for Auntie, stopped it from happening. She killed the woman who was supposed to take Auntie’s place, and fought the man who killed her.....he was killed in turn...and so...we had two empty spaces...instead of one.’ The masked figure tilted his head at him. ‘They were filled some years later.’

‘So’ Cam said. ‘Why are you so interested in me?’

‘Despite all we’ve seen’ the figure replied, ‘of all the worlds we have access to...we’ve never seen anyone like you, we’ve never seen anyone with the powers you have. You are one of a kind.’

‘So what does that have to do with you?’ Cam asked him. ‘That doesn’t explain why you want to help me.’

The figure grinned behind his mask. ‘We are curious’ he answered. ‘Merely curious.’

‘Curious?’

‘That’s what we do’ the masked figure explained. ‘We are *observe*, we see things, watch people’s lives, their struggles, their pain...and sometimes...we intervene.’

‘You have been watching me since I was a child.’

‘Some of us have’ the masked figure nodded. ‘There are many other people and other beings that take our interest also.’

Cam nodded slowly in understanding.

‘So you want to see how far my powers will go?’

‘Yes’ the masked figure replied. ‘There is much magic in you, that much is obvious to all of us. And it’s like you said.’ He smirked. ‘We want to see how far this will go...’

The masked figure left shortly after, and Cam was alone on the balcony once again.

He was joined sometime later by Luke, who had left his bed to find him.

Cam had been deep in thought, and hadn’t heard his brother approach.

‘Oh’ he said when he saw Luke appear beside him. ‘You’re awake now.’

Luke glanced sideways towards him, before looking out over the horizon.

‘Lucy’s alive’ Cam said, answering the question before Luke had a chance to ask. ‘The masked figure told me.’

Luke didn’t ask who the masked figures were, instead he spoke about Lucy.

‘She is alive’ Luke repeated, speaking slowly. ‘That is all that matters.’

Cam glanced to the side towards the sea, watching the gentle waves lapping up at the shore.

‘Luke’ Cam said turning to him, ‘I’ve wished so hard and for so long that things had been different. I wish that we had not been born as princes, I wish that father had never died, I wished that mother was different, and that she loved us...like Auntie used to.’

‘I feel the same’ Luke replied meekly.

‘Do you remember her?’ Cam asked him. ‘Do you remember Auntie?’

‘Yes’ Luke nodded slowly. ‘I do.’

‘I never...I never told you what happened to her.’

‘I didn’t want to press’ Luke said.

‘You’ve probably already guessed, but I think I should tell you anyway.’ Cam breathed slowly. ‘She was murdered.’

Luke blinked, and his eyes widened slightly. ‘By who?’ he asked.

‘I...I don’t know. But it was someone she trusted...someone she loved...the other masked figure we saw her with.’

Luke fell silent in thought. ‘Who can you trust in this world?’

‘Trust yourself’ Cam answered.

‘Do you trust me?’ Luke asked.

Cam smiled faintly.

‘More than anyone else in the world’ Cam answered. ‘I’m sorry I ever doubted you.’

Luke smiled weakly back at him. ‘Let’s not dwell on the past, those things we cannot change. Let us look only to the *future*.’

They fell silent, watching the clouds overhead drift lazily by. The blue sky shone brightly like a jewel above them.

‘These days won’t last’ Cam told Luke after a time. ‘I will have to leave soon.’

‘Leave?’ Luke echoed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The masked figures that saved you’ Cam explained, ‘in exchange for their help, they ask for something in return.’ Cam narrowed his eyes. ‘They want me to travel to other worlds...they believe it will help me...master my powers.’

Luke turned to face him.

‘...other worlds?’

‘I said I would do it’ Cam explained. ‘I owe them now; I made a deal, your life...in exchange for this.’

Luke continued to watch him silently, wearing a firm expression.

‘They want to take me away from here’ Cam said.

‘Why?’ Luke asked. ‘Who *are* they? Why do they show interest in you? What do they want, and why were they willing to save me?’

‘I don’t know’ Cam whispered shaking his head. ‘I know almost nothing about them.’

‘What *do* you know about them?’

Cam paused. ‘There are eight of them.’

A silence passed between them.

‘They have been watching over us both for a very long time’ Cam mumbled after a while.

‘Listen’ Luke began, ‘there’s something left. I received a visitor when I was healing, when you were away.’

Cam turned to look at his brother. Luke was smiling.

‘I hope you still remember her.’

The door to the balcony opened behind them, and Cam whipped around.

He gasped at the figure that appeared before him then.

‘...Valery?!’

She smiled widely to him. She had grown considerably in the time that Cam had been away, had matured. She was taller, slender, and more beautiful. Her eyes sparkled; the peach coloured dress she wore looked stunning on her shapely figure, and for a moment Cam was lost for words, amazed that this was the same person.

Valery moved closer to Luke then, placing an arm around him, as he wound an arm around her waist. They shared a silent glance, before looking back at Cam simultaneously.

Cam glanced at each of them in surprise.

‘I hope you're not upset’ Luke said to him.

Cam grinned widely at both of them, unable to hold it back.

‘Of course I'm not upset’ Cam said to Luke, beaming at the both of them. ‘Valery’ he sighed.

‘I've missed you.’

‘I've missed you too’ she smiled at him, ‘more than you could know...’

Cam paused then, watching Luke and Valery as they stood together, holding each other.

‘I'm glad you've both found happiness’ Cam said to them.

They left the balcony a short while after that, the three of them returning to the many vast halls of the home they shared.

‘I hate this place’ Cam spoke out of the blue, ‘I've hated this place for so many years.’ He surveyed the halls and rooms and the many many stairs around them as Luke watched him silently. ‘Let's get away from here’ Cam suggested. ‘Let's go away.’

Valery tilted her head at Cam, her glossy hair falling over her shoulders, before glancing silently towards Luke.

Luke blinked at Cam's suggestion.

‘Get away?’ he repeated. ‘Where, and for how long?’

‘Anywhere’ Cam answered, ‘because I want to, and for as long as we want.’ Cam turned to his brother, wearing a smile upon his face, a genuine gesture as he regarded his brother warmly. ‘Let's just go’ he said. ‘Why can't we? What's really stopping us?’

‘But the council...’

‘They are running things here anyway’ Cam shook his head. ‘They don't care about either of us, and right now...that is how I like it.’

Cam and Luke each chose two fine horses from the stables. Both were handsome stallions, fit, healthy and beautiful, in the prime of their lives.

The brothers took some money to last them, some food and other things they might need, tools to start a fire, pans and blankets and mats to sleep on.

‘I hope you know how to cook’ Cam grinned at Luke, indicating the pan that hung from the saddle of the horse he was to ride.

‘I know a bit’ Luke said defensively, crossing his arms and frowning in mock annoyance.

‘Just because I'm a prince. I hope *you* know how to cook.’

‘I think you’d be surprised’ Cam smirked knowingly back. ‘I’m sure I know more than you do.’ *Perhaps being away from home was good for more than one reason.* Cam thought to himself. *I have learnt so much of many things since I’ve been away. Perhaps Durril was right to leave me behind.* ‘So?’ Cam asked his brother. ‘Are you ready?’

‘Are you?’ Luke teased back at him.

Cam grinned widely at him, turning around and shaking his head.

‘After me then’ Cam said, before mounting the horse he had chosen.

Luke turned to Valery briefly, kissing her softly upon the lips and whispering into her ear.

‘Everything is going to be alright’ he told her, ‘I’ll be back as soon as I can, I promise.’

She nodded to him in understanding, taking a step back as Luke mounted his own horse.

Cam smiled to her as they walked their horses away. She raised arm and waved to both of them as they went.

‘Do you think she’ll be safe left here?’ Cam asked.

‘Mother’s soldiers are watching over her’ Luke replied.

‘But not for you?’

Luke grimaced then. ‘I...put myself in danger...to try to help you.’ He shook his head, smiling then. ‘It doesn’t matter, let’s just go.’

Each of the brothers raised the hoods they wore, doing so only as a disguise to protect themselves as they left the capital. None would try to stop them, but they didn’t want to be recognised all the same.

As they were making their way out of the palace stables, riding their horses slowly down the path, Luke noticed something suddenly.

‘Look.’

Cam glanced around.

Standing on the roof of the stables a short distance away, were two masked figures, clad all in black, with no skin visible.

‘What are they doing there?’ Luke asked, sounding slightly nervous.

‘It’s alright’ Cam said. ‘They’re there to protect us.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I just know’ Cam said flatly. He raised his hand, waving back to the figures in black. They raised their hands, waving back.

‘You trust them?’ Luke asked tentatively.

‘Yes’ Cam mumbled, ‘...and no...’ he faced ahead again. ‘I’m sure they will not try to harm me, or allow me to come to harm, not for the moment at least.’

They rode out of the gates that were the entrance to the palace grounds, and stepped out into the street.

The horse’s hooves clip-clopped on the stone street, and the brothers made their way quickly forwards, resisting the urge to send their horses into a canter and get away as fast as possible. It was awkward to move through the crowded streets, and the roads between some of the buildings were narrow.

After a time, they came to a familiar place.

‘Do you remember?’ Cam asked Luke, indicating the building of the thieves’ guild, a part of the family they once used to be.

‘I remember’ Luke replied solemnly, eyes lingering on the building. ‘I wonder what’s happened to them all?’ he spoke in a distant voice as they passed by. ‘They must all be far away somewhere...living their lives...’

‘I hope they are happy’ Cam mumbled.

‘Me too...’

As they reached the main entry road to the capital and stepped out onto the open land, both brothers breathed a sigh of relief.

‘It feels good’ Luke smiled warmly, ‘just to get away from it all.’

‘It does’ Cam nodded. ‘Just think how different things would be if neither of us were princes.’

‘The thought of having lived a normal life is such a strange one to me’ Luke mumbled.

‘It is’ Cam nodded, ‘to me also.’ *Though I have lived it...if not for a brief moment...*

He glanced sideways at Luke.

‘Let’s go.’

They kicked their horses hard in the flank, over and over again until the beasts increased their pace into a canter, racing across the land with the wind whipping at their hair and clothes.

Cam and Luke rode as fast as they could away from the palace, away from the roads, instead travelling across the open plains.

They slowed only when the horses were exhausted, coming gradually to a gentle walk.

Cam and Luke exchanged an excited glance, before both looking behind them to the city that was now far away.

‘I think it’s very exciting’ Cam gasped.

‘What’s exciting?’ Luke asked him, panting and wiping the tears from his eyes as the wind had stung him.

‘It feels’ Cam said, facing forwards again, ‘like we’re going on an *adventure*.’

They travelled for some time, before camping in the sheltered world within the woods as night began to fall.

‘I never thought I’d say this right now’ Cam said as he lay on his back, looking up at the stars behind the branches of the trees, ‘but I’m actually having fun.’

‘Good’ Luke smiled beside him. ‘I’m glad you are at ease.’

Cam blinked slowly, resting back with his hands behind his head.

‘Do you think Lucy’s alright?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Yeah’ Luke replied. ‘I do.’

The next morning they woke early and set off again, the horses that had been kept indoors for a long time tossed their heads excitedly, happy at last to be out. The brothers urged the beasts onwards.

In no time at all it seemed, they reached the manor where Cam had lived for several weeks. The journey for Cam seemed far shorter than it had first time, and the place when they reached it was nothing like he remembered.

The manor had been completely destroyed, now only the foundations remained, where could be seen nothing but charred and blackened wood, and broken glass from the windows. It was clear that the place had long since been abandoned.

‘So this is where you stayed?’ Luke asked curiously.

‘Yeah’ Cam mumbled, standing on the ground beside his horse with Luke. ‘I was...better before the attack... ..’ he trailed off.

Luke glanced towards him, before looking at the building again.

‘I wish I could have seen it whole’ Luke said forlorn as his gaze travelled away from the manor itself and to the grounds. ‘I bet it was beautiful.’

‘Yeah’ Cam mumbled. ‘It was.’

They searched the bones of the manor, but found nothing inside.

That night, the brothers set up camp just outside the stables, which had not been destroyed, but remained whole. It was a warm night, the cloudy sky kept the heat of the day over the kingdom.

Cam leant back against the stable wall, staring at the blackened broken manor. His brother rested opposite him, lying on his back, a small fire burned between them.

The walls of the courtyard either side of them were tall.

‘We’ll be protected from the wind here’ Cam spoke in a murmur. ‘We should be safe here. The eight are watching over us.’

Luke rolled onto his side, staring back at Cam.

‘We should get to a town soon’ Luke told him, ‘before we start to run low on food.’

‘Yeah’ Cam mumbled. ‘It’s the obvious place to go next. We can ask around once we get there....ask if anyone has seen Lucy. She would stand out more I think...because of her red hair.’

Luke watched his brother for a moment longer, before closing his eyes, and succumbing to sleep.

Cam watched his brother for several minutes, before looking back at the manor.

Those figures are sure to be watching us he thought. Lucy.....I hope you're safe...I hope you're out there somewhere.....

They set off early the next morning, as they had the last, and made their way to the nearest town. Here, they learnt that several people had arrived some days ago, claiming to have escaped a fire. They had travelled from the woods.

Cam listened in eager silence as Luke questioned the innkeeper. They left together after that.

‘So they went across the narrow sea’ Luke said, walking out onto the streets and staring at the harbour before them.

The narrow sea is what many people called it; it was also nicknamed the wide river. Small ships often journeyed back and forth carrying passengers, as they were on this day.

‘There is another kingdom across the waters’ Luke said staring at the ships. ‘I wonder why they went there.’

‘We have to follow them’ Cam hastened.

‘Don’t worry’ Luke said glancing back. ‘We will.’

They went to pay for a fare to cross the water. It wasn’t long before they ran into problems.

‘You call this money?’ the man said to them. ‘No the price is worth double at least, more so if you want to bring your horses.’

Luke and Cam exchanged anguished glances.

‘Listen’ Luke said stepping forwards with a friendly smile. ‘I think it would be in your interest if-’

‘Listen to me you tepid cur!’

The three of them looked around in shock at the new figure that had appeared. Cam instantly recognising the black cloak and gloves, but this figure wore no mask, not this time.

‘Do you have any idea who these people are?!’ Wonderland practically shouted at the man. ‘I am an important official! You will let these people ride for free...*and* their horses, or else I will see your head rolling down the steepest hill I can find. No, make that a *mountain*!’

The man stared at the cloaked figure in shock.

‘I am an important person’ Wonderland continued. ‘I have a personal relationship to the *king himself*! This man’ she indicated Luke, ‘is very important to him. Make me angrier and I will...I will...’

‘Throw my head down the nearest mountain?’ the man offered weakly.

‘Yes!’ Wonderland snapped. ‘I’m glad you understand. Now let them go for free or I will strangle you with your own intestines then play golf with your kidneys.’

‘Um...’ the man replied uncertainly.

‘Now do as I say or I’ll have your children killed. I know each of them by name. Shawn five, Ella six and Brom nine. You were planning to go on a picnic soon to celebrate your tenth anniversary. Your wife would be sad if you couldn’t make it...’

‘Yes yes I get your point’ the man said beginning to sweat and looking very confused and alarmed that she had known all of that. ‘The men can go for free.’

‘And their horses!’

‘Yes their horses too.’

‘Good’ the cloaked figure said beginning to calm. ‘I’m glad for your sake we could reach an understanding.’

The man rushed away to prepare a space for the horses.

Once he was gone, Wonderland turned to the brothers. She addressed Cam.

‘We are all on your side’ she spoke in a hushed voice. ‘We will find her no matter what. *Trust me.*’

She turned and glided away without another word.

‘So these are your masked friends’ Luke mumbled once she was gone. ‘They seem nice...a bit melodramatic.’

Cam shrugged at him at this.

‘They are a bit odd aren’t they?’

In no time at all, the ship was assailed, and the brothers were standing upon the deck, leaning against the wooden balcony of the ship and looking out over the sea.

‘It been great’ Cam began, ‘getting away and just being with you....catching up on the time we’ve lost. But the real reason I wanted to get away was to find Lucy. I know the others are out searching for her....’

‘But you want to find her yourself’ Luke finished, placing his hand upon Cam’s shoulder. ‘I understand. I would want the same too.’

‘Thanks Luke’ Cam said glancing back at him. ‘I knew you would understand.’

‘Of course I do’ Luke smiled. ‘Let’s find her together.’ He drew his hand back then, a sombre expression crossing his face. ‘When are you leaving?’ he asked, speaking the inevitable.

‘I don’t know’ Cam admitted. ‘When the masked figures want me to I suppose, probably when Lucy is found.’

‘Even if they find her first?’ Luke asked.

‘Oh’ Cam said, speaking aloud what Luke was about to say next. ‘What if I don’t get to see her...?’ he asked himself.

Luke pushed himself off the balcony wall, straightening then. ‘She’s out there somewhere, your Lucy. I’d very much like to meet her again.’

Cam glanced sideways at his brother, a smile playing about his lips.

‘When I return’ Cam spoke in a distant voice as he looked on, ‘when I am stronger.....I’m going to make things right...I’m going to be the king I should have been. The king our father always strived to be.’

Luke looked back at him as Cam glared with determination at the water below them.

‘This...’ Cam uttered, ‘...I swear...’

It was a short journey to the other side, and the brothers stood side by side on the highest deck, watching the land they were heading to coming slowly closer. Cam gripped the wood of the ship before him as he leant forward, glaring ahead with a fierce determination, his brother standing a step behind him.

I will find you...Lucy.....I will see you again. He narrowed his eyes. *Wait for me...*

But it was before they reached the land, that they received the news.

Wonderland came back to them, appearing out of thin air before them. Cam’s stomach clenched at this, as he grew scared, fearing bad news. But then she smiled.

‘Lucy has been found!’ Wonderland beamed. ‘She is alive and well.’

Cam stifled a sob, hand going to his mouth in relief.

‘Oh thank the gods...’ he uttered.

‘Come with us’ the figure said to him. ‘It is time. We will help to make you strong.’

‘What’ Cam uttered. ‘I don’t get to see her?’

‘You want to be strong don’t you?’ Wonderland said to him. ‘Do you want to return to her now, or as something better?’

‘I...I want to see her.’

‘Don’t you trust us?’ Wonderland asked him. ‘After everything we have done for you?’

Cam bowed his head.

‘Say your farewells to your brother’ Wonderland said backing away. ‘We will leave this world together, you and I Cam. You have only minutes.’

She drifted away, but she did not vanish. Wonderland only wandered to the other side of the ship, to stand and stare out at the sea on the other side.

Cam turned to Luke, who looked back at him sadly.

‘Well...’ Luke began slowly. ‘I guess this is it then.’

‘You’ll go on ahead won’t you?’ Cam urged him. ‘You’ll keep going...to find Lucy yourself...and tell her what has happened to me.’

‘I will’ Luke whispered, tears brimming in his eyes. ‘I promise I will.’

They embraced each other, holding one another tight.

‘You’ll come back’ Luke said to him. ‘You will come back won’t you?’

‘Yes’ Cam whispered, fighting back his own tears. ‘I promise. I swear to the gods...I will...’

Wonderland held out her arm, inviting Cam to move forwards. Once he did, Wonderland summoned a portal, using her magic with ease, to create a doorway to another world.

‘Are you ready?’ Wonderland whispered excitedly to him.

Cam glanced at her hesitantly, before looking back at his brother. Luke gazed back at him, nodding once slowly in encouragement.

Cam faced ahead again, staring at the portal reluctantly for a moment, before taking a breath and stepping towards it.

He stood directly before it, squinting at the bright light as it shone in his eyes.

He turned back to face his brother, just one last time.

‘This is it’ Cam said.

‘This is it’ Luke echoed, his voice unhappy.

‘I will return one day’ Cam told him. ‘I promise I will come home.’

‘I know you will’ Luke nodded slowly.

Cam turned away to face the blinding light again.

He took one last steady breath to calm his nerves, before stepping forwards, through the portal, and to places unknown.

The next time Cam opened his eyes, he was in another world.

End of The Prince of Light Part One, the story continues and ends in Part Two